BACCANO!
The Rolling Bootlegs
RYOHGO
NARITA

RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI

ONE DAY BEFORE
INSIDE ALVEARE

"We've decided to fire you slowly over about six hours, starting now."

In a room with simple décor, a mature-looking boy was surrounded by a group of hard-faced men.

"...What would you do if we said that?"

The man with glasses, the one who'd first cracked that dangerous-sounding joke, put his beaming face a bit closer to the boy.

"The way this room feels right now, I'd probably apologize even if I hadn't done anything," the boy answered tensely.

He'd been summoned, and when he'd arrived, all the syndicate's senior executives were there. He wondered what in the world he'd done.

"Uh... Did I do something?"

"All sorts of things. Too many to count."

A large, imposing man spoke in a low voice.

"Boss... No, look, there must be some kind of mistake. I haven't done anything, really..."

"I can shatter that composure of yours easily. I just have to say the word, tell you one particular thing."

"Guh... Go on and say it, sir. Say the word."

With a solemn expression on his face, the big man, the boy's boss, opened his mouth:

"Tomorrow, go buy a hat with Maiza."

For a moment, he didn't understand what the words meant. Then, he saw the male secretary and the elderly Asian who had been silent up until now, begin to clap for him, quietly— And he got it.

"No... You can't mean... Are you serious?!"

Just as the boss had predicted, all composure had vanished from the boy's face. It had been displaced not by terror but by an expression as full of joy as a little kid's.

"Of all our young guys, you've racked up too many achievements to count. That's why."

Going to buy a hat with an executive. It sounded trivial, but in this syndicate, it was an extremely significant act.

"Congratulations on your promotion to executive."

The beaming man commended the boy as happily as if this had been happening to him personally. "Tomorrow morning, then, in front of the hat shop..."

A FEW DAYS AFTER, OR A FEW HOURS BEFORE
IN FRONT OF THE STATION

I tell ya, they were one weird pair.

"So, this is our city of hope, is it?!"
"We just bursting with it!"

Yeah, I thought about slugging 'em. This place, bursting with hope? How many tens of thousands of people do they think have offed themselves here since the Crash last year?
I'd just lost my job that morning myself. ...I didn't get axed. When I got to work, the whole company was gone.
Anyway, some other mug knocked the guy down before I got to him.

"Yagh-mmrph!"
"Waugh, Isaac!"

...But the guy didn't recoil or nothing. He got right back up, spread his arms wide to the sky, and shouted:

"That's it! That's the big city for you! The thrill of violence that could strike at any moment! There are senses that can only be honed by this feeling of living on the edge— Or so I'd like to believe!"
"I believe! It's a little scary, though!"
"Don't worry! God is on our side! As proof, we stole those priest robes and things that were hanging behind that church the other day, but God didn't smite us for it, remember? In other words, he's indirectly telling us that our actions are just. I'm positive!"
"That's amazing!"

I was also positive about something: These guys were idiots.

"Mirla, let me just say one thing."
"What?"
"While we're in this town, whatever you do, don't stand out— At least not until the job, anyway."
"I know! I'll blend in until the job!"

At the time, the idea that even these dimwits had jobs seriously burned me up... But the "job" they were talking about was that kind of job, huh?
Ah, now it all makes sense. Yeah, that's right: This place, New York, is a city of hope. For criminals like the Mafia and those guys, anyway! Say, what the heck did they do? If you fellas from the Bureau of Investigation are sticking your noses in, they must've pulled off a real doozy, right?
...What? What're you laughing at?
Oh, after that? Let's see... Y'know, at the end, they did say something like this:

"All right, let's go find a hat shop, just like we planned."
"Yes, a hat shop!"

Is that all you needed from me? Don't thank me. Point me toward some kind of work instead. You fellas don't want to let me slide into a life of crime, right?
...I don't want to cling to the warped hope in this town's back alleys yet, either, see.

There was no conversation in the car. Only silence filled the small space.

Without breaking that silence, the female chauffeur thought:

If only this stifling silence would go on forever.

"My existence in this world has no meaning." She'd heard people declare this flatly in despair, and she'd envied them.

To have no reason to exist, how wonderful that would be. In other words, you could live your entire life for yourself alone. Wouldn't that be the ultimate freedom, in a way?

However, unfortunately, her existence had a point.

She was a tool who belonged to the old man behind her. That was her reason for being, a destiny she couldn't fight.

People said it was lonely not to be needed by anyone. That said, the old man needed her constantly, but she was exposed to loneliness even so.

For that very reason, she liked to bury herself in silence. It was the only time when she wasn't needed, yet she could still continue to live.

However, the silence she loved was summarily killed by the voice of the insensitive old man.

A FEW MINUTES BEFORE
ON THE ROAD

"If that 'liquor' truly has been completed... that lot will be useless. We'll dispose of them."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll do the disposing. You just hold back the ones who cry and scream. That's easy, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

How egalitarian this old man is, she thought. It wasn't just her: He treated all of humanity indiscriminately. Everything was equal: race, gender, age, ideology, saint, scoundrel, past, future, hatred, pain... He treated them all equally, as his tools. Disposable ones.

"We're in the city now, are we? ...Avoid the main streets."

"Yes, sir."

The chauffeur stopped thinking. Efficiently, working from the map in her mind, she calculated the route to the backstreets.

Then the car made for those backstreets. Toward the hat shop—or rather, the corner with the hat shop that served as the entrance.

Berga: "Why's the mark on this ace of spades so huge, anyway? Change."
Luck: "Because in England, long ago, it was mandatory to embellish the top card and put the company name on it. Change."
Berga: "Huh. Okay. But what's with the kings? When you see 'em like this, they've all got the same face. Are they triplets or something?"
Luck: "They say the model for the king of diamonds was Julius Caesar."
Berga: "Caesar? Who's he? And this guy, the jack, he's got kind of an irritating mug... Yeah, like that turf stomper I rubbed out the other day. Don't you think he looks like him?"
Luck: "I wouldn't know. You turned the guy's face into hamburger, Berga. ...No, no good, I'm out. There's no way I can beat three of a kind."
Berga: "...Huh? How'd you know I had three of a kind?"
Luck: "...Is that a joke?"
Keith: "...(shuf)"
Berga: "Oh."
Luck: "Five of a kind..."

RIGHT BEFORE
THE GANDOR FAMILY

Berga: "Dammit! Hey, Keith, c'mon, no more using the joker when we play poker, all right?!"
Luck: "Well, Death likes Keith, you know."
Keith: "..."
Berga: "Moron, it's the other way around. Keith's one of Death's fans!"
Luck: "You're right. ...Well, here comes someone Death really does like."
Keith: "..."

Jorgi: "Oh... Boss... You're all here?"
Berga: "C'mon, sit down."
Luck: "How about a hand of poker, Jorgi?"
Jorgi: "Su-sure, uh..."
Keith: "..."
Jorgi: "By the way, there were lots of cops by the hat shop this morning. Did something happen?"
Luck: "Oh, we'll tell you about it later. It does concern you in a minor way, after all."

EPILOGUE...1
PROLOGUE
DAY ONE
NIGHT
DAY TWO
EPILOGUE...2

BACCANO!

The Rolling Bootlegs

VOLUME 1

RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI

YEN ON
NEW YORK

EPILOGUE...1

EPILOGUE…1

2002 Summer Manhattan Island, New York

Why did things turn out like this?

“Face to the wall!!”

I remembered what *face* and *wall* meant, but what did *to* mean, again…?

They didn’t seem to give a rip that I couldn’t speak English. I mean, they’d had my head shoved up against the stone wall before even giving me this warning (if that was what this was).

It all started with a lottery held by my local shopping district.

“Coooongratulatiooooons! It’s the grand prize: a five-day, three-night trip to Neeeew Yooooork!”

Accompanied by an aneurism-inducing scream, a bell clanged away.

Clang-clang-clang-clang-clang…

I’d landed in America with that sound still echoing in my ears.

Even though I’d really only wanted the second-prize game console…

I headed through a forest of skyscrapers, making for the Manhattan Bridge. I’d decided to get Chinese in Chinatown. When you’re not sure what to eat, get noodles: That’s common sense the world over.

This might have been the “grand prize,” but it had come with a minimal travel allowance, so I couldn’t do anything too extravagant. It was so bad that, although the prize had originally been a trip for two, I’d hocked one of the tickets at a secondhand ticket shop and managed to squeeze out some pocket money.

There was a Japanese beef bowl chain in New York, and I was (financially) really attracted to it, but something about seeing the name written in Latin letters bugged me. I hadn’t even been in the city for a day yet, and already I felt starved for the sight of kanji characters.

As I walked along, thinking about stuff like that, I began hearing raucous voices.

Five or six boys were yelling in a narrow alley that led off the broad avenue. They seemed to be crowded around something, jumping and hollering, so I went a bit closer, just to see. Then a kid who looked like the youngest of the bunch grabbed my hand and smiled at me. “Look, look!” he said.

What was it?

I was curious, so I went farther into the alley and looked into the center of the circle.

—What’s the deal? There’s nothing there.

The second I opened my mouth to say that, I did a double take. The kids—still laughing and hollering—all jumped me at once.

The rest happened like I said at the beginning.

I’d always thought that if I got dragged into this sort of trouble, I’d be able to make the right decisions and deal with it on my own… But just look at the reality: They didn’t even give me time to react.

I don’t know what they did to me after that, or how. Before I knew it, I was lying on the sun-warmed asphalt, and by the time I managed to pick myself up, the kids were beating a hasty retreat around the corner.

My first thought was *I’m lucky I didn’t get killed*, and then I realized they’d taken all my stuff. …Yeah, I wouldn’t call that luck. I probably should have been grateful for my continued existence, but “Once the danger’s past,” et cetera. I even thought, *You know, I wish I’d hit ’em back*. It’s a seriously self-serving way of thinking, but if you don’t think like that, you’ll go under.

I was just getting started as a wildlife photographer, and I’d brought an expensive camera along on the trip. Result: I lost the whole thing.

Dammit, how many hundreds of thousands of yen do they think that camera cost?! I couldn’t help but be bitter.

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There was nothing to vent my anger on, so I stomped it down, and all I did was contact the police through the hotel. In a way, the fact that I was turning into

the stereotypical Japanese victim who shows up in movies and on TV bothered me even more than getting mugged.

The police response was about what I'd expected.

All they gave me was the absolute minimum of the paperwork I'd need to file an insurance claim. A hotel employee who understood a little Japanese had come along with me, and according to him, the police wouldn't seriously exert themselves over an incident like this. If I'd been obviously injured, or if somebody had threatened me with a gun, things would've been different, but…

That said, that camera had been *expensive*. I'd practically traded my life to get it, and I couldn't bring myself to just let it go. And anyway, I hadn't even had the money to get it insured.

If nothing changed, the second I got back to Japan I was probably going to go find the president of the district who'd offered me this trip and kick him in the back of the head out of sheer misdirected resentment.

While imagining hitting the guy with a Shining Wizard once he was on his knees, I desperately stood my ground. The officer was sympathetic, but the mood around here said that they really did have to prioritize murders and other dangerous crimes.

…Then the graying officer glanced over the report again, considered the address where the mugging had gone down, and muttered something.

My interpreter made with the interpreting, and apparently this was what he'd said:

"…You know, you just might get that camera back. Mind you, it's not really something I can recommend, but…"

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"Well, well… You've had a rather trying day, haven't you?"

The guy who showed up at the arranged meeting spot was a youngish, mild-looking man.

Light brown hair, round glasses. He was dressed like your typical bank clerk. His Japanese was so fluent that at first I thought he *was* Japanese, but a good look at his face told me he wasn't, not by a long shot.

The middle-aged policeman had made a call, then just pointed this place out to me. “You’ll meet a man here; ask him for help. You won’t need an interpreter,” he’d said, and that was all. I remembered that he’d had a really complicated expression on his face.

“You were lucky. The sergeant who took your complaint was Paul Noah; he’s an acquaintance of mine. If he hadn’t been the one to help you, you probably would have had to throw in the towel.”

From the way he was using phrases like “throw in the towel,” it was obvious that the man’s Japanese was pretty advanced. His pronunciation sounded completely natural, too. …As a matter of fact, compared to your average modern person, there was something a bit old-fashioned about it.

“I heard what happened. The ones who stole your bag were probably Bobby’s gang. They’re mischievous scamps who’ve been fooling around in this area recently.”

…Did something like that qualify as “mischief”?

There was something really shady about this guy. He was probably some kind of detective, but he had this atmosphere about him that seemed to say he wasn’t on the level.

Even so, it was reassuring just to be able to talk to somebody who spoke my language.

…That thought didn’t last long.

“How about it? For…say, a tenth of the value of your stolen belongings, I’ll ‘negotiate’ with them and have your bag returned to you, just as it was.”

…Oh, I see. Looks like this guy’s the ringleader of this gang of thieves. In exchange for only getting 10 percent of the profit, he can keep the fuss to a minimum, and he won’t have to bother exchanging the goods for cash.

Still, I thought, 10 percent was a lot better than it could’ve been. I agreed, although I was careful not to trust the guy while doing so.

“Okay. It’s a deal.”

With that, the man began leading me off somewhere.

He wasn't going to cut out my organs and sell them, was he? The concern did cross my mind, and I decided to yell for help and make a run for it if he tried taking me anywhere that seemed even a little dicey.

By the way: If you get killed and they sell off your organs, does it technically count as human trafficking?

While I was thinking about pointless stuff like that, he led me to a bar on the corner of a wide avenue.

The sign had a picture of a beehive on it. There was a string of letters inside the picture, but I couldn't read them, so for the sake of convenience I'll call it the Beehive Place.

Inside, the air bore the sweet smell of honey. Compared to the outside, the interior looked pretty roomy. It might have been more accurate to call it a classy restaurant, rather than a bar.

He'd better not be planning to rip me off. Thinking this and looking around, I did see some guys who didn't seem quite legit, but since I also saw old people, couples, and families with kids, I relaxed a bit.

My guide went to the back, exchanging a few words with another guy. The new man nodded silently, then stood and left the place without taking his stuff with him. He didn't even pay his check.

"I filled him in on the situation. He's gone to reclaim it. The locals know those kids' faces, you see. I doubt it will take long to find them."

Nice act. I know you're in on it, too. …I didn't say this out loud, of course.

"Well, why don't we talk a bit while we're waiting?"

It was a genuine invitation, but I had no idea what to talk about. For starters, then, I asked him why his Japanese was so good.

"Ah, that. One of the men at the top of my organization is Japanese… His name is Yaguruma-*san*; he taught me quite a lot. That said, I picked up modern speech patterns from movies and Japanese comics."

Organization. Did that mean he really was Mafia or something? Now that I'd come this far, I was feeling numb and reckless, and I didn't care if he *was* Mafia

—or anything else, for that matter—so I flat-out asked him.

“No, not Mafia. We’re generally viewed as the same thing, but… We’re called the Camorra. Do you know it?”

I’d never heard the word before.

“The Mafia is from Sicily, in Italy. Their organization began as armed groups of guards in rural districts… Vigilante corps, as it were. The Camorra is also from Italy, but it started in Naples. They say the syndicate was formed inside a jail, but even I’m not clear on the details.”

Started in prison. Hearing that alone made me think this Camorra group sounded nastier than the Mafia, but I kept that to myself.

“I act as the *contaiuolo*, the treasurer, for my organization. It’s rather like being a bookkeeper… In the Mafia, an accountant does the job.”

They sounded pretty much the same to me.

“Ha-ha… Well, that’s because everything’s lumped together as ‘the mafia’ these days. The drug mafia, the Chinese mafia, the Russian mafia, the smuggling mafia… But in Naples, it’s the Camorra that’s mainstream. That said, ours is a rogue group: Not only were we created in America, we have no direct ties to Naples.”

He rolled out all sorts of other information, but none of it really clicked for me. I'd never even run into a gang in Japan before. The fact that there was a camorrista or a mafioso—either way, a guy who lived on the dark side of society—right here in front of me just didn't feel real.

"That's only natural. Even among the people of New York, I'd say less than 1 percent have ever encountered the Mafia. The same holds true for people who've been directly harmed by them, of course. I'm a rather forward person, and I sometimes introduce myself to people like you. That said, I'm sure the number of people I've spoken to is only a small fraction of that 1 percent."

…Seriously. It was enough to make me feel like crying over my own luck.

At the time, though, I'd already been drawn in by the guy's conversational skills. I'm not sure how to put it. I'd started feeling as if I was talking to somebody I'd known for years. …This even though, at that point, neither of us knew the other's name.

"Well… There are probably more, actually, but those who've felt the presence of the Mafia almost never speak of it, you see."

I'd heard of that in movies and things. It was something like omertà, "the code of silence," where people pretended they hadn't seen crimes for fear of retaliation.

But in that case… What was this guy doing talking about his organization to someone he'd just met?

"Ha-ha. It simply means that, other organizations aside, ours isn't that strict. We aren't involved in anything that outrageous, either. …In any case, members of the Sicilian Mafia won't even speak of the fact that they belong to the Mafia, but the Camorra—and the American Mafia, actually, years back—tend to introduce themselves as such. The bosses sometimes respond to interviews for magazines and things personally."

Meaning you're show-offs? When I asked, there was a moment's silence, and then he burst out laughing.

After he'd laughed for a while, the man gazed at me as if I really interested him, and he began speaking again.

"…You've got guts. To think you'd say something like that directly to a camorrista… Aren't you afraid?"

No.

"Is it possible you think I'm not really a gangster?"

No. Even if you were lying, I don't see why you'd need to go out of your way to pretend to be Camorra.

"You're an odd one. When I heard about you from Paul, I assumed you were a stereotypical Japanese pigeon."

Mind your own business. And besides, if you're that fluent in Japanese, you should talk about people who are older than you properly; use *-san*. "Paul-*san*," like that. Even if America doesn't have much of a seniority system, they do address their elders with at least bare-bones courtesy. …Or that's what the guidebook said, anyway.

At that moment, I had no idea that casual comment would be the switch that sent the gears of my life off course.

After a silence longer than the one before it, the man chuckled and murmured something.

"Coincidences are truly…fascinating. Aren't they?"

What was he talking about? As I sat there, bewildered, the man gave a smile that seemed almost boyish. It was a smile that gave him the appearance of having found a new toy, or maybe as if he was about to pull some kind of prank, and he had it turned on me.

Then, after looking as though he wasn't sure whether or not to say anything, he lowered his voice and informed me:

"Paul is younger than I am."

Oh. ……Huh? Wait a second, what did you just say? No matter how you looked at that police officer, I'm pretty sure he was past middle age. …Did his face just come across as old or something?

"Well, about that… Returning to what we were speaking of earlier: It's probably been about a hundred people over the past sixty years or so. People

I've introduced myself to as Camorra, I mean. That doesn't include people who knew already or police officers, but… In any event, unless things like this happen, I have no opportunities to get acquainted with upstanding tourists. Ha-ha."

I thought I'd heard wrong. Sixty years. The young guy in front of me was… I'm bad at telling white people's ages based on their appearances, but he didn't look as if he was even halfway to sixty.

As I watched him steadily, puzzled, the man adjusted his glasses and said, sounding a bit embarrassed:

"The thing is, you see, I suppose you'd call me immortal. I don't die."

Ah-ha. So this is one of those American jokes.

"Oh, you don't believe me. No, it's true: You can cut me or burn me, but I won't die."

I hear American jokes are notorious for going on for a while.

I gave him some sort of perfunctory response, and, still smiling, the guy—

—drew a knife from an inner pocket and stabbed his own hand.

For a second, I didn't know what had happened. Red blood began dribbling from the hand with the knife stuck in it. I was dumbfounded, but the man just laughed.

"It's fine. …Look."

Slowly, he extracted the knife. I expected blood to come spurting out, but the bleeding had stopped completely.

Not only that, but I saw something unbelievable.

The blood that had dripped onto the table…started to squirm, as if having a life of its own…and seeped back into the man's open wound, as though returning to its host. When all the blood had vanished, the wound itself disappeared. There wasn't a single stain left on the table.

If I'd been watching this on some kind of screen, I'd have been able to call it a cheesy special effect and laugh it off. However, unfortunately, it had happened right in front of me.

Both the way the liquid moved, defying gravity, and the way the wound closed in the blink of an eye had been so corny I thought CGI might actually look better. That only made it creepier.

I thought I might have been the only one in the place—no, in the world—who'd witnessed this abnormality. Here, in this restaurant with its slightly upscale atmosphere, a guy had just scrambled the laws of physics.

…And yet not one of the customers or employees was even looking our way.

After giving it a little thought, I spoke to…whatever it was…in front of me.

Are you going to kill me? I asked.

At that, the man looked a bit surprised. Then he smiled again.

"That's a reaction I haven't seen before. Up until now, when I showed this to people, some of them brandished crucifixes at me, and some whipped out guns and started firing… The police hauled away the latter, of course. Poor devils; I'm afraid that was mean of me. Come to think of it, there were some who ran the second they saw the knife."

Well, duh.

"Why did you think I'd kill you?"

Because I thought you were a monster, I answered honestly. Then I apologized for treating him like a monster, and at the same time, I told him that, whether it was real or a trick, he should stop scaring people like that.

"…You really are a rare breed. No one's ever stayed this calm before."

Unfeeling would probably have been a more accurate assessment than *calm*. I hear this from people all the time, but apparently the shock of almost getting eaten by a brown bear once in Hokkaido had numbed my sense of fear. I've been told I should become a war photographer, but I don't have the know-how to get across a battlefield, so I'd die for sure. I didn't want to die, so I'd stayed a wildlife photographer.

When I told him this, the man looked me in the eye, steadily. He seemed entertained.

"You're quite a fascinating person. …Listen, since you're here, would you be

interested in hearing me talk about old times? The story of how I acquired this power of immortality, and the curious tales surrounding it… It would be a good way to pass the time."

That did sound like an intriguing story…but was it all right for me to hear it? After all, we'd just met.

"It doesn't matter. Even if you told others about it, I doubt they'd believe you."

I told him, firmly, that it had better not be anything religious. There was somebody immortal right in front of me, and I'm not sure why I was so calm. Looking back, I think I was a complete moron.

"Ah, don't worry. It's nothing to do with anything like that. It really is just a simple way to kill time. …Although I suppose a demon does make an appearance in this story."

The man who'd called himself a Camorra *contaiuolo*, a man who was apparently immortal, ordered our food from the waitress, and then slowly began to relate his "legend."

"All right. Then I'll begin… It's the tale of a man who drank the demon's liquor and gained immortality. That miserable man's lonely, lonely yarn. The stage is Prohibition-era New York. It's a story of the peculiar destiny surrounding the sudden appearance of the 'liquor of immortality,' and of the spiral of people who found themselves drawn into it…"

PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

1711 The Atlantic Ocean The *Advena Avis*

Alchemy.

Believed to have originated in ancient Egypt, it was an academic discipline, a skill, and at the same time, a culture.

Having sprung from Egyptian arts, it came to Western Europe via the Arab world during the Renaissance and deeply permeated the society there, fusing with Greek philosophy and—via Hermetic thought—religious concepts as it did so.

It sometimes sought, as its name in certain languages suggests, to transmute base metals into gold; at other times, it attempted to create artificial life divorced from the hand of God, and in the end, it pursued eternal life. …No, even that couldn't be called the end: There was no end to the heights sought by the alchemists. They devoted themselves to daily study, endeavoring to make the impossible possible; if they managed it, the impossible would *be* possible. Their ultimate goal would fade and grow dull. They seemed likely to vanish into their own knowledge and desires, or possibly their sense of mission, as they pursued further impossibilities.

In early modern times, as alchemists were hampered by those around them and occasionally targeted by envious looks—a mundane whirl of small minds misunderstanding great ones—they continued to pursue various skills and to meet with failure. However, their actions were not in vain. They made a variety of contributions to modern science, beginning with the alchemist Newton's discovery of universal gravitation. Alchemy was by no means a system of pseudoscience.

Still, from time to time, there were some who attempted to fuse it with fields apart from science. With magic and thaumaturgy.

Generally, alchemy and magic tend to be considered synonymous, but the two

are completely different. Among alchemists, there was a tendency to discount magic and prayers, viewing them as unscientific things that relied upon external forces. However, some of them actively dabbled in these fields.

After all, if their existence were confirmed, even magic and demons would become possible. They would be no more than tools to break open the next impossibility.

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The ship was enveloped in the dark of night.

In that darkness…all they heard was a voice.

The alchemists had left their homeland and were bound for the New World.

Onboard the ship, at long last, they had successfully summoned a demon.

“So you call me a demon, do you? Well, I suppose that will do. …But have any of you ever seen God or an angel? I’d imagine the word *evil* has meaning only when there’s an object for comparison. Well, never mind. It’s been 103 years since anyone took the trouble to summon me. If you’d been three years earlier, it would have made for a nicer number… Well, never mind. Ah, ‘Well, never mind’ is an idiomatic quirk of mine. Just ignore it. Although I suppose it’s odd to call it an ‘idiomatic quirk’ when I’m communicating directly with your minds. Well, never mind.”

In accordance with the oath by which it was bound, this unusually loquacious demon promised to bestow knowledge on the alchemist who had directly summoned him.

“I want to know everything regarding immortality,” the alchemist said.

“In other words… You’re hinting you’d like me to make you immortal? Well, never mind.”

On the deck of the ship, in the center of the group of alchemists, there was a vessel filled with liquid.

“If you drink that, you will become immortal. Decide what to do next on your own. I’m immortal myself, but impressions vary widely. …Wait, wait, calm down and listen to this next bit. I’m a generous soul. There’s enough of that elixir for everyone here. Share it. Don’t fight. …All right: if you tire of immortality and wish

to die…”

The demon proceeded to teach them a method by which immortals could die.

“Go find someone else who drank the elixir. If someone asks you to, lay your right hand on their head and think, ‘I want to eat.’ You just have to think it forcefully. The one who wished to die will be absorbed into your right hand, and their life will end. *Eating* means you’ll inherit all the other person’s knowledge. That means the last of you will accumulate the knowledge of all thirty. If that last one tires of living, summon me again. When you do, I’ll ‘eat’ you. That means I make out well: I’ll gain the knowledge of thirty people… By the way, just so you’re aware…there is a risk. Once you drink that elixir, you’ll be unable to give a false name. That limitation will be set on your spirits. If you’re passingly giving your name to an ordinary human, you won’t have any trouble, but among immortals, you’ll only be able to use your real name, and your body will refuse to allow you to establish a false identity in society. …If it weren’t for that, you see, you’d never be able to find one another.”

The alchemists thought for a little while. Then they divided the elixir among themselves and drank it. The elixir tasted like liquor.

“Oh, that’s right… I promised to teach you everything, didn’t I? I’m not sure what ‘everything’ should consist of, but for now, I’ll tell you how to prepare more of the elixir. Mind you, I’m not telling everyone here. Only this man, the one who summoned me. If you want to know, ask him later.”

With that, the invisible demon gave the alchemist who’d summoned him “knowledge.” The man was still young, and he didn’t understand what had happened. He only knew that knowledge he hadn’t possessed before had been planted in his memory.

The demon’s voice went silent.

The man who had obtained the knowledge thought about it for a night.

His younger brother was with him on the ship, and he began telling his sibling the secret of the elixir of immortality. When he’d related about half of it, he had a sudden epiphany.

The next day, he made a statement:

“…I’ve decided to seal this knowledge forever.”

Voices of protest rose from among the alchemists, but his mind was made up.

And that night, it happened.

The man who’d acquired the knowledge was cautious. In the middle of the night, he felt someone’s presence, and when he opened his eyes… One of his companions stood in his cabin.

This companion’s hand rested on the head of the alchemist’s younger brother, who slept in the opposite bed…

In an instant, the man was fully awake, but it was too late: Like magic, everything his brother was disappeared into the right arm of their companion—or rather, the one who, up until that moment, had been a companion.

“…I didn’t think they’d start this soon,” the demon, who was watching from the darkness somewhere, murmured to himself. “Allowing that I did set them off, after a fashion… That’s the human race for you. Greedy things. Granted, this is entertaining to watch as well, but…”

The being they’d called a demon continued. It sounded a little lonely.

“…I did think that this time, perhaps…”

The demon’s voice was gone. Only darkness that gave the illusion of being infinite remained.

And time passed.

DAY ONE

DAY ONE

1930 November New York

The sky was the sort people call crystal-clear. The town was illuminated by the transparent light of the morning sun.

Buildings of red and yellow brick were packed together as though they were trying to cover the entire city in color. That said, the people who walked in their midst didn't feel crowded by them.

In fact, the automobiles that had begun to make their presence felt in recent years pressed the pedestrians much harder.

The time was Prohibition. All sorts of social currents had converged, and the country had elected to become a "dry society." Consequently, though, the appeal of liquor had actually increased, and even those who hadn't previously indulged began frequenting illegal taverns. …In other words, ironically, the result had been the creation of more criminals.

A general store stocked grape juice on its shelves, accompanied by a written warning:

If you let this sit for a while, it will ferment and turn into wine. Drink it before that happens.

This grape juice practically flew off the shelves. It was that kind of era.

The Jazz Age had passed its peak, and the previous year, the Great Depression had gripped America. The redbrick buildings that filled the city seemed somehow faded.

Still, in the shadows of the city, there were "protagonists" who had the power to resist the Depression. In general, they were lumped together as "the Mafia," and they had acquired vast power using the sale of bootleg liquor as a foothold.

In other words, the government's Prohibition policy had become a perfect hotbed, helping them—the enemies of the law—to rapidly advance in society.

All sorts of legends, great and small, sprang up among them, with Al Capone and Lucky Luciano topping the list. That was what 1930 was like.

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Their legends always began in the back alleys.

“Change? Spare any change?”

The emergency exit of a bank. Between tightly packed tenements. Where restaurants threw away their leftovers… Frankly, as long as there was a narrow, gloomy road, anywhere was fine. It didn’t matter whether it was crowded with people or nearly deserted. The season or the hour didn’t matter either, of course.

“You can save this miserable man with just the tiniest show of human feeling.”

A panhandler’s voice sounded behind the hat shop. This voice, echoing in the alley, might actually have been where it all started.

Every time someone passed through the alley, a middle-aged man in shabby clothes badgered them, persistently asking for change. When they stepped out onto the street, he’d give up and go back to where he’d started… A monotonous cycle.

“The good Lord sees what you do. It won’t be long before your actions call down his blessings upon…

“What I’m trying to say here is—”

Abruptly, the repetitive cycle was broken.

The man who’d spoken to the panhandler… It might still have been all right to call him a boy. He stopped suddenly, turning to face the bearded man attempting to cling to him.

“Why are you dropping God’s name all over the place like that?”

Neither his tone nor his attitude matched his age. At the unexpected question, the panhandler’s expression grew puzzled.

“What do you mean, mister?”

“Are you a devout Christian? Have you ever gone to Sunday worship, even once? Did you give to the Church before losing your job? Can you tell me the

difference between Catholics and Protestants? If so, you shouldn't be invoking God's name and begging in a place like this. Either get yourself to a church and help the nuns with their volunteer work, or look a lot harder for a job, or else blame God for leading you to this state and become a Satanist."

The panhandler was overwhelmed by the tone of the boy's quiet harangue, but as soon as the lad paused, he howled an objection.

"But mister! What about donations to the Church, then?! *They* use God's name, and they get thousands—no, *millions*—of times more money than a bum like me!"

"Except you were only thinking about your own pocket, and you know it. …It just means God turns his back on self-centered louts like you. The Great Depression probably landed you on the streets, but even so, the guys standing out on the avenue with signs saying, 'Give me a job' are taking life a lot more seriously than you."

The panhandler tried to make some sort of retort, but he couldn't think of anything clever. Even as he struggled for a comeback, the boy continued his own selfish lecture.

"And anyway, there's an art to panhandling, too. Some who make a living at it stand out on street corners in tatters, even though they've got money. A few of them actually break their own arms or teeth, for effect. When they beg, it makes passersby tear up even more than the sight of someone truly infirm. Compared to them, you're a total amateur."

At this point, the boy glanced upward briefly, then pulled a leather wallet from his jacket.

"Huh?"

The panhandler had no idea what was happening. Based on the direction of the conversation, naturally he'd held out no hope of getting any change. …So why had the fellow before him withdrawn his wallet?

"—Ordinarily, I wouldn't bother with an amateur like you, but…"

He produced a few coins. However, the panhandler's eye had been caught by the thick stack of bills in the billfold. It wasn't a sum that anyone, especially a boy

like him, should have had in this Depression. Even an adult with an honest job would have been hard-pressed to get that much money. That was how fat the wallet was.

“Today’s a big day for me, see, and I’m in a real good mood. Go ahead and take these, and consider yourself lucky you spoke to me.”

After a few moments, the panhandler’s face crumpled with joy.

“Oh, ohhhhhh, thank you ever so kindly, mister! I’ll remember this good turn for the rest of my days!”

“Nah… I don’t care if you forget it, just hurry up and take the money.”

The boy urged the panhandler on, not quite sure what to do with the coins spread out on his palm.

“Ahhhh, the good Lord will surely bless your actions, too.”

“Look, I told you, quit pretending you’re religious when it’s convenient…”

“I know! Say, I’ve got some flowers I picked this morning. It’ll be proof of the kindness you did me. Go on, mister, take one.”

No sooner had he spoken than, without taking the money, the panhandler began rummaging through the dirty paper bag he was holding.

“They’re probably wilted by now, anyway.”

“No, no, I’m sure God will make ’em bloom again, nice ’n’ pretty.”

The panhandler peered into the paper bag, his face still warped with delight. And then…

“A big, bright, *bright red* flower…!”

The calamity struck in an instant.

A small, ferocious calamity that inflicted itself upon the poor paper bag.

A dully gleaming bowie knife sprang cruelly from its shredded belly.

“_____!”

The bearded panhandler screamed something inarticulate, his face well and truly happy.

And almost before his weird, ecstatic cry had ended…

…it transformed into a shriek of shock and pain.

“—Gaaaaaaaaah! Gah! Gwaah… Ah!”

Just before the tip of the blade reached his gut, the boy slapped aside the hand wielding the knife, simultaneously twisting his body lightly. The blade sliced through air, skimming past the boy’s side. In the next instant, he’d grabbed his opponent’s outstretched arm, wrenching it up with ease.

These were the only moves made in the interval between exhilaration and excruciation.

“Hup.”

Little by little, as if leaning into his assailant’s back, the lad put more of his weight behind the hold.

He heard the knife strike the pavement but paid it no heed.

A definite creaking sound became audible from the vicinity of the joints in the man’s arm.

But that noise was drowned out by the man’s screams.

“Waugh… Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Ah! Kha! Augh! St-st-st-st-st-st-stop…!”

When he saw the panhandler’s will dominated by pain, the boy shoved him into the dark red brick wall. The man fell to his knees with a dull thud. Then, moaning, he slowly tipped over, rolling around on the ground.

Watching his attacker from the corner of his eye, the boy picked up the coins that had been scattered by the brief bout of violence.

Then, when he noticed the bum had stopped moving:

“C’mon. Get up.”

Taking the man’s arm with a certain wariness—his assailant was about twice his size—the boy pulled him to his feet. Then he leaned the panhandler’s back against the brick wall.

“Your mistake was flagging me down. I’m not a pious guy. Unfortunately for you, I’m not self-sacrificing enough to stand there and let you stab me.”

Breathing roughly, shoulders heaving, the man let the boy's sarcasm slide. He glanced away quickly, moving only his eyes. Even under these circumstances, he seemed to be searching for some way out.

"Planning to make a break for it? Don't be hasty."

Spreading the coins he'd picked up across his palm, the lad held his hand under the man's nose.

"Remember what I said? Consider yourself lucky…"

He balled his hand into a tight fist, squeezing the coins hard.

"…Be grateful and *take 'em*."

It didn't look as though he'd taken much of a swing. However, the punch the boy paid out had enough force behind it to break the hobo's front teeth.

"—!"

The impact of the blow slammed the back of the panhandler's head into the brick wall. This, in combination with the pain from his front teeth, elicited a wordless scream, and then—he slid, slowly…scraping his back down the wall… finally crumpling messily to the ground.

Unlike before, he'd completely lost consciousness, so he didn't roll around on the pavement this time.

Slowly, the boy relaxed his clenched fist. One after another, coins dropped from it. They rained down onto the man's face, which was smeared with blood from his nose and mouth. His mouth hung open, sloppily, and a few of the coins fell in. The dry, metallic sound of the ones that hit the pavement was drawn into the decaying air of the alley.

"…Hmm?"

Glancing over, the knife from earlier lay on the ground, a little ways away. Its shape was common, and it wasn't worth much.

I guess I'll toss it in the river…

The lad turned back for a moment. The panhandler was definitely out cold. Still, just to be on the safe side, the boy decided to take the weapon.

Just as he reached for the cheap, dully gleaming thing, a voice called his name.

“Firo Prochainezo. Hold it right there.”

Quietly withdrawing the hand that had almost touched the knife, the boy—Firo—cast a look toward the voice…toward the mouth of the alley…the light of the street.

He saw the figure of a young man standing with that light behind him. The newcomer was probably in his midtwenties. Over a brown suit, he wore a black coat that covered him down to his knees.

“None of that. Hands off the evidence.”

Turning unpleasant eyes on Firo, the young man slowly picked up the knife with white-gloved hands.

“Edward… What’s going on here?”

“That’s ‘Mr. Edward’ to you. Address your betters politely…*kid*. Or you can call me ‘Assistant Inspector Edward,’ if you’d prefer.”

With an arrogant smile, the man in the black coat—Assistant Inspector Edward Noah—quietly raised his right hand.

At that, several men appeared behind him…and began collecting the torn paper bag, the scattered coins, and the unconscious idiot, one after another. None of them paid any attention to Firo. They were each a head taller than he was, rendering him, quite literally, out of sight.

“Hey, men, be careful. Don’t step on the brat and squash him.”

Letting their boss’s lame joke pass without comment, the men continued working silently.

“…Huhn. Unsociable lot.”

“Explain this, Ed—…Mr. Edward. You’re making me look like a fool.”

Firo, who’d kept mum up to this point, spoke quietly.

The goods had been mostly taken away, and the men who’d been working diligently were nowhere to be seen. The only trace of the recent incident was a small bloodstain left by the panhandler.

Edward answered Firo's question without turning, or even looking over.

"True, you're not a fool. A scumbag, yes, and an urban tick, but not a fool."

"Don't dodge the question."

An edge of irritation was creeping into Firo's voice. With a sneer at that irritation, Edward leaned back against the brick wall and lit a cigar.

"Come on, dial back the menace. The scum you just laid out… We've had an eye on him for a while. He's a suspect."

"Suspected of what?"

"Murder. We think he used the same method he tried on you. He'd pretend to be a panhandler in some back alley, check the clothes—or the wallets—of softhearted ladies and gents, and if they looked like they had enough money to make it worth the risk, he'd run 'em through with a knife hidden in a paper bag… Like that. Although we only just found out about the paper bag."

"Why'd you leave a guy like that on the loose?"

"We had eyewitness testimony, but no real clincher. We were planning to step things up by using an officer as a decoy and catching him red-handed." Edward took a big puff of his cigar.

"…And then I showed up?"

"That's about the size of it. Frankly, if it hadn't been one of you people, we would have sent someone through casual-like and made sure you stayed safe, but…"

"…So you had your eye on that from the beginning. That's a nice little hobby you've got. Were you watching an altercation where somebody might have gotten killed like it was a boxing match or something? …I bet you ate your way through most of your popcorn, didn't you?"

"And because we agree, we're overlooking your *excessive use of force* for you."

"I'm so obliged I can't stop crying."

"You know, personally, I wouldn't have minded a bit if you'd gotten yourself

shivved and died, but… That was a very impressive dodge.”

“When somebody’s panhandling in a deserted spot like that, you keep your guard up. Then there was that obviously suspicious paper bag. …I’m lucky he didn’t have a gun in there.”

“Oho? Then why didn’t you just ignore him?”

He posed a very natural question.

“I didn’t feel like it today. If he had been just a panhandler, I was going to give him some money… Hey, why are you trying to pick a fight with me, anyway?”

“Remember what I said? The culprit only went for people with fat wallets. He only tried for scores that were worth the risk of stabbing somebody in broad daylight and making a run for it. See, I couldn’t believe a brat who’s not even twenty yet would have a fortune like that…”

This was sarcasm: Edward clearly knew he had it.

“…So, what? You’re going to take me in for theft or tax evasion?”

A sharp light had come into Firo’s eyes.

“Ha! Is that a joke? Who’d need to beat around the bush like that for a two-bit punk like you? Even if you were at the top of your ‘syndicate,’ a weak little outfit like that is nothing but bait for everybody else! The only reason it’s still around is because it’s so unappetizing no one even looks at it!”

“—One more word, and I’ll take it as an insult.” Firo spoke briefly and flatly.

Just as the boy was wondering how to get rid of this guy, someone called his name again. This voice was kind and calm, the exact opposite of Edward’s.

“There you are, Firo.”

A tall, mild-looking man with glasses stood at the border of the broad street, where Edward had appeared a short while earlier. In the light that flooded in from the avenue, his pale, brown hair shone like gold. At first glance, he could have been taken for someone Edward’s age, but the vague atmosphere the man wore made it difficult to discern how old he was.

“We were going to meet at this hat shop, weren’t we? You didn’t come. I was

worried, and then I heard your voice out here…”

Although there was no telling what he was so happy about, he beamed a startlingly bright smile.

However, as if in exchange, at the sight of that effusive expression, Edward’s conceited smirk disappeared completely.

“You’re…”

“Maiza! Oh… I’m sorry. I got pulled into some trouble…”

Firo’s attitude was the polar opposite of what he’d shown Edward, the assistant inspector. He hastily straightened his collar and stood tall, correcting the slight slump his shoulders had settled into.

On the other hand, Edward glowered and stubbed out his cigar on the brick wall.

“Maiza Avaro. Well, well. Fancy meeting the Martillo Family *contaiuolo* in a place like this…”

There was tension in Edward’s voice. In contrast, Maiza returned his greeting with a disarming grin.

“Erm…… Ah. If it isn’t Assistant Inspector Edward. You seem to be in exceptionally good humor today.”

It was a pretty ironic way to greet someone who was clearly in a foul mood, but possibly because the man was beaming, Edward didn’t really feel as if he’d been the target of sarcasm.

“…Huhn… Should’ve known. Unlike the brat, you at least know how to greet people properly.”

“No, no. I won’t be able to call you ‘Assistant Inspector’ for much longer, you see.”

“……?”

“I hear you’ll be ‘Agent’ Edward, starting next week.”

At that, the assistant inspector’s eyes went wide, and his mouth flapped several times before he responded:

“What…are you talking about…?”

“Oh, was I wrong? There’s a little rumor going around town.”

Edward’s eyes flared with hatred. It was true that, next week, he’d begin his training period with the Bureau of Investigation (which would, five years later, be renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation…the FBI). He hadn’t even told his sweetheart or his colleagues, so why were the sort of people who really shouldn’t have been in the loop in the know?

Resolving to track down the source of the information leak, the young assistant inspector turned his gaze back to Firo out of sheer embarrassment with himself.

“…Anyway, Firo, listen up. It doesn’t matter who you give handouts to. Nobody’s gonna see you as anything but a phony. Quit doing useless nonsense and either get yourself out of town already or get ready to do time.”

The conversation had shifted back to him abruptly, and for a moment, Firo was bewildered. Before long, though, he answered as though it was a pain in the neck.

“Like I care? Even if I’m posing or doing it to make myself feel good, it’s all the same to whoever gets the dough. Who exactly am I bothering with this so-called phoniness, huh? Where are they?”

“Don’t think everyone will be happy to get that dirty money you bring in.”

“…That makes donating to community chests and organized charities a real nice system, doesn’t it? There’s no way to tell which money came from where.” Firo didn’t deny the part about dirty money. “Not that I make a habit of giving handouts.”

“That again… What is today to you, anyway?”

Just as Edward asked his question, Maiza broke in:

“Firo, we should be going. …That’s all right, isn’t it, Assistant Inspector?”

“…Uh, yeah…”

“Oh… I’m sorry, Maiza. I did keep you waiting, didn’t I?”

The two of them prepared to leave. Watching them go, the young assistant inspector mulled.

A skilled up-and-comer in a syndicate and one of its senior executives. A special day.

Something occurred to the detective, and he called at the boy's back.

"Firo, don't tell me you're…"

The lad stopped. His back remained turned as he faced the broad street.

"…Don't tell me… An executive? …Are they promoting you? *You?* One of the associates?"

He frowned as he asked the question, as if doubting his own words.

Edward had lived in this city a long time, too. He admitted that Firo was a capable foot soldier in his syndicate, but he was too young to be promoted to executive. The "boy" wouldn't be twenty for another year and a half, and he looked three or four years younger than that. The idea of this kid being made an executive of even a small underworld organization—no, of any organization at all, even a daylight one—was inconceivable.

Still, he'd heard there was a special ritual that accompanied promotions. Firo had said he was meeting a senior executive—one who, as a rule, would never allow an audience—at a hat shop… He knew that on "special days" a central figure of Firo's syndicate always visited a milliner or tailor. Just knowing this wouldn't get Edward anywhere, but it was a good way to gauge who the players were.

"Hey… Is that really it?"

The boy didn't answer. He didn't deny it, either. Without a word, he started walking again.

Edward took that attitude as affirmation. With an appalled smile, the sort he would have worn on hearing a tall tale down at the bar, he kept right on talking, aggressively.

"Seriously? They're actually making you an exec? *You?* A little brat like you? You're puttin' me on, right? C'mon, now… Hurry up and tell me I'm wrong. I'm

about to bust a gut over here. So, what, is your outfit really that short on people?”

The pair ignored him and set off. It didn’t bother Edward. He went on, laughing. “Or, you know, I always thought you had a kind of girly face… How many executives do you gotta lay to skip to the top like that, huh?”

Silently, the two men stopped.

Firo wondered if a threat was in order. His thoughts went to the knife at his hip.

“Assistant Inspector.”

However, it was Maiza who turned first.

Still wearing that benign smile, he faced the assistant inspector and said, simply:

“Go any further, and we’ll take it as an insult.”

Edward’s expression froze. His sneer died in his throat.

Maiza’s smile was simple and honest, and his tone was no different from what it had been a moment before.

However, the poor assistant inspector had realized something.

I’m going to die.

The instant he said a single word about “the syndicate” or Firo, the man in front of him would probably kill him. The cold emotion resonating deep in that voice had him convinced.

The eyes were what drove the thought home. They elicited in the inspector an unnamed fear, as if something unknowable was stealing into them from their depths…

As Edward closed his mouth, realizing he’d broken out in a cold sweat, Maiza laid a hand on Firo’s shoulder and continued:

“…True, our syndicate may exist *only to be eaten*…”

He paused for a moment.

“…but be careful not to let the poison do you in.”

That bastard. So he was eavesdropping.

Edward thought this but was unable to actually verbalize it. The sensation of cold sweat had reached his back.

Firo was still glaring at the assistant inspector. Patting his companion’s shoulder twice, Maiza stepped out onto the thoroughfare as though nothing had happened. As if drawn by the motion, Firo’s feet also turned toward the avenue.

“…Reme… Remember this… Even if you kill me, I’ll never accept Mafia scum like you… Someday…I’ll wipe you out…! I swear it!”

Behind them, the pair heard the assistant inspector’s strangled voice.

“Ah. We aren’t Mafia.”

Waving a hand lightly, Maiza answered without even turning around.

Firo followed him, and they disappeared into the crowd.

“We’re—Camorra.”

In the alley, after they’d gone, the assistant inspector’s fists trembled.

“Uh… Assistant Inspector, we should head back to the station.”

Just then, one of the officers who’d been confiscating the evidence a minute ago returned.

“…And where were you?”

“Erm…well… We were all waiting in the car, but you didn’t come, so…”

“Don’t give me that! You just couldn’t bring yourself to turn up until now because you were scared of that *contaiuolo*!”

“S-sir, that isn’t…”

The officer’s face went pale, signaling to the assistant inspector he’d guessed right.

“You scumbags call yourselves policemen?! What is our job, huh?! To protect the laws of the United States and the safety of its citizens, that’s what! Their kind threatens both! What good are we if we’re afraid of them, too?!”

He kicked at the redbrick wall repeatedly with his nearly new leather shoes.

His accusation went for himself as well. The idea irritated him even more.

“Maiza Avaro…Firo Prochainezo… I didn’t like them before, and I swear I’ll take them down someday with my own two hands!”

In an attempt to calm the enraged assistant inspector, the foolish police officer added an ill-considered joke:

“That sounds like a line from some mafioso in a novel.”

Edward’s aggrieved leather shoe landed a vicious kick on his subordinate’s shin.

⟺

“Apparently we’re going to get wiped out.”

“Ah, scary. People like that are truly tenacious. …Although, with police officers, the tenacious ones are the ones you can trust.”

Firo and Maiza looked at each other and chuckled.

“What would we be doing trusting cops?”

After leaving the alley, the two of them walked between Little Italy and Chinatown, heading toward the Manhattan Bridge. They’d met at the shop in order to buy a hat, but since that particular haberdashery had proven “unlucky,” they’d decided to go elsewhere.

“If we’re going this way in any case, I know of a good shop.”

As a result of Maiza’s suggestion, they ended up walking for nearly an hour.

“Musicals are wonderful, aren’t they…? What do you suppose the Good Witch from *The Wizard of Oz* does for a living the rest of the time?”

The man called Maiza really didn’t seem like a camorrista.

He didn’t brawl, he didn’t yell, he smiled constantly, and he was polite to absolutely everybody. In general, he didn’t seem to have any of the traits of a denizen of the underworld. Had he behaved this way only in town, it would have been possible to assume that he was hiding his true colors from the world, but he remained unchanged even at syndicate meetings or when doling out orders

to his subordinates.

When the Camorra and the Mafia were compared, the Camorra was often said to be the more violent of the two. However, not a glimpse of that desolate reputation was discernible in Maiza.

People said he'd been appointed *contaiuolo* because he was the best in the organization at reading, writing, and sums, but it was weird that a guy like him was in the organization at all, let alone an executive. That was how it felt to Firo, at least.

Some of the lowest associates even looked down on Maiza, calling him a "coward" and "gutless wimp." Firo thought the guy was all right, so he stood up for him whenever he could, but unfortunately, if the man in question was speculating about *The Wizard of Oz*, nothing Firo could say was at all convincing.

"Ah, there it is. I'm a bit of a regular at this shop."

The old haberdashery stood on a wide street with a view of Manhattan Bridge.

When they entered, the elderly shopkeeper shot them a glance but offered no welcome of any sort. He was a very unfriendly proprietor for a store on a major street, but when you considered the sheer range of merchandise on display, that didn't matter at all. The shop specialized in hats and belts, and its stock was so vast that Firo gave a small murmur of admiration.

"This's incredible…"

Hats hung on every wall. Or rather, the hats completely hid the walls, to the point where you had to wonder whether there were really walls behind them at all. It wasn't just the walls, of course: Scores of hats were arrayed on the shelves lining the shop as well, and the area around the register was hung so thickly with belts that they looked like wallpaper.

"It really is amazing, every time I see it… I'm supposed to pick the hat that looks best on you out of all of this, you see. …I'm sorry, but it may take a while."

"Absolutely. Don't worry about it. Take as long as you need. I'll wait."

Ducking his head in a deferential nod, Firo began gazing at the mountain of hats, too.

Among the Camorra, as a rule, when a member was promoted to camorrista—executive—he wasn't told about it until the night of the promotion ritual. However, their family had a custom that differed from other Camorra groups. The member in question was notified the day before, and on the morning of the ritual, he visited a hat shop with a specific executive. There, the executive picked out a hat for the member who would join their ranks that night, choosing the one that suited him best.

There was no special meaning to it. The custom began when Molsa Martillo, the current head of the syndicate, had run up his family's flag in New York and given each of the first members a hat. That was all.

Even so, to Firo—on the brink of becoming an executive—choosing a hat was part of the important ritual, and he'd gone into it both elated and with a mild case of nerves.

While contemplating headwear with Maiza, the recent incident and the spiteful assistant inspector completely vanished from Firo's mind. All it held now was a mixture of anticipation and trepidation regarding the ceremony that would take place that night.

"This one might do. What do you think?"

A hat settled onto Firo's head.

A pearl-green fedora. In the reflected light from the door, the pale green seemed to shine faintly. It went well with the boy's light skin; he looked as if he'd stepped out of a picture. When he moved into the shadows and the green lost its tinge, it abruptly adopted a dark color… The contrast with his white face grew clear, and it made him look sharp.

"This is… Maiza, this is great! It really *is* perfect for me!"

He wasn't just being considerate toward the *contaiuolo*; he was genuinely delighted. He looked at himself in the shop's big mirror, feeling as if he'd become a different person. He thought he'd like to get a coat in a matching color. It would probably make him stand out a little… No, a lot, but he didn't care.

As the boy gazed into the mirror, his smile was truly happy. Based on that expression, it was impossible to imagine him as he'd been a short while ago,

sarcastically needling the panhandling mugger or ruthlessly punching him in the face.

It was the first time Firo'd shown a face like that since the boss had given him permission to join the family.

While they bought the fedora, the shopkeeper was as silent as ever. Wordlessly, he put the merchandise in a bag, and money changed hands according to the price tag. Even when Maiza gave him a casual, seasonally appropriate greeting, the old man only shot him a cold, silent look.

Still, the two didn't let it bother them, and they left the shop, chatting about what the menu might be for the party to be held after the ritual, and about picking up some liquor at a speakeasy on their way back.

Exiting the establishment, they passed a couple on their way in.

The man was even taller than Maiza, and he nearly bumped his head on the door's lintel. The woman was a little shorter than Firo, and she wore jeweled bracelets on both arms and shining silver rings on several fingers.

Both were dressed in very swanky outfits. The man sported a tuxedo with black leather gloves and no tie. The woman wore a black dress with bright red belts wrapped around her waist and arms. It was a rather unusual costume for a woman of the time, and it made her seem like a witch from a musical.

In short, the couple stood out from the rest of the world like a pair of sore thumbs.

“Whoops! Excuse me.”

They’d bumped shoulders, and Maiza apologized immediately.

“Hey now, be careful.”

“Be careful!”

The woman echoed the man’s words immediately after he’d said them.

Nothing else happened just then, but sizing up the couple, who looked like Broadway escapees, Firo thought: *They both look like they’re twenty or so, but… In tough times like these? Are they some rich guy’s kids?*

Speculating in a fashion that completely ignored the contents of his own wallet, he left the shop.

In the haberdashery, after Firo and Maiza had gone… The man in the tuxedo—Isaac Dian—spoke to the woman—Miria Harvent—who stood next to him.

“Listen, Miria. One more time, just to make sure: No matter what, don’t do anything eye-catching.”

“I know. I just have to be really, *really* mousy and quiet, right?”

“That’s the ticket. As long as you know.”

After this exchange—which, thanks to their outfits, was fairly unconvincing—the pair looked around at the chapeau-laden walls. The man held a large travel bag in his right hand, but he certainly didn’t seem dressed for travel.

“Egad, they’ve got everything here.”

“It’s all-you-can-buy!”

“I bet we could conquer the world with hats.”

After producing that incomprehensible metaphor, the man picked up a random topper and began spinning it on his finger.

“What sort of hats are we going to get?” Miria asked.

“Well, something normal would be good to start with. …Or, no, something

eccentric might make for a better distraction…”

The farther they ventured into the depths of the store, the wider the variety of choices became.

At the end, there were rows of straw hats, even though it was winter, and Indian feather headdresses, and even the tall, round black hats that the guards of the English royal family wore, all on display.

“…Is it all right to sell things like this?”

Isaac was holding a helmet that was part of the gear worn by New York’s uniformed policemen. Meanwhile, Miria had put on a U.S. soldier’s helmet, and her appearance, which had already been eccentric, leveled up to the point where it could be described as downright weird.

“Wow, this is nifty.”

A strikingly brilliant piece of merchandise sat on an upper shelf. The hat was made of metal. Something like stiff cloth adorned its edges, and gold thread had been used in places. And on the forehead, there was a shining golden…

“What’s that? Is it a boomerang?”

“Maybe you’re supposed to head-butt people with it? I bet that would hurt.”

Two objects like oddly shaped knives were affixed to it in a V shape.

Below the strange helmet was a card with the word *Japan* written on it.

“Aha… Maybe it’s a Japanese crown.”

“I bet it is. It’s sort of shiny, even!”

The shelves below the crown held masks from some civilization or other, silk derby hats for phantom thieves, and other articles that were far beyond questionable.

“……Is this a bit too peculiar?”

Smiling brightly, Miria let something fearsome slip as if it was nothing. “It might not be good for robbing people in!”

“Well, never mind, let’s just buy them all.”

In the end, without paying any particular attention to what Miria had said, Isaac took a black fedora and a woman's lace hat, plus the Japanese crown and a peculiar wooden mask, up to the register. Quite a lot of paraphernalia was deposited in front of the old shopkeeper.

Even then, the haberdasher was silent. He only glanced at the items, then smoothly wrote down the prices of each and the total on a receipt.

The paper showed a sum equal to two months of a bank clerk's salary. Casually, the man called Isaac withdrew a bundle of bills from his bag, counted them carelessly, then held them out to the shopkeeper.

He'd given him too much, and a minute later, a dozen or so bills and a few coins were returned to his hand as change.

Then the pair added something entirely unnecessary.

"Listen up, Gramps. You'd better forget the fact that we visited this shop entirely."

"Better forget it."

In some cases, doing and saying things like that—compounded by the conspicuous outfits they wore—would have been enough to get these two reported on the spot. Apparently, true to their appearance, they weren't quite all there.

"If you report us to the police…we'll, uh… What will we do?"

Even as he admitted to being a criminal, her beau in a tuxedo openly asked Miria for help.

"Umm, why not just say we'll hit him? If you don't have anything specific in mind…"

"I see. Well then, Gramps! If you report us…we'll *hit* you!"

"*Hit* you!"

By all indications, the two of them were even worse than they looked. In more ways than one.

Whether or not he'd been listening to their dubious lines, the shopkeeper fixed

the pair with a cold scowl, all but his eyes utterly motionless.

Immediately, the man and woman fell silent. Then they hurried out of the shop, hugging to their chests the items they'd set down at the register.

The shopkeeper turned his eyes to his newspaper and forgot all about the customers who'd just visited.

"Haah, haah, haah… Th… Th-th-th-that was *scary*."

"Really scary…"

Running as if fleeing the hat shop, the notable pair reached a nearby alley.

"Blast it… That old man must be a real tough guy. Just one glare, and he had me… Uh… Well, no, I wasn't *afraid*, but…um… He made me run… No… Ran me off…???"

"Made you withdraw."

"Yes, that's it… To think he made me withdraw with just one glare… Of course, you know—if we'd fought, I could have beaten him, but you see, well, he was strong, too, and I thought it would be terrible if you'd happened to get hurt, Miria."

"Really?" Miria asked, sounding happy.

"Yes, really! In the year since we began our tour of larceny, we've robbed eighty-seven places, from San Francisco to New Jersey, and in all that time, have I ever put you in danger?"

"About eighty-seven times."

"……"

"……"

"There, you see?! It's not even a hundred yet!"

"You're right! That's *amazing*!"

Her cry sounded as if she was moved from the bottom of her heart. If they were like this, it was likely there'd been many times when they hadn't even recognized the danger they were in.

“That’s right! We’ll do our last big job here in New York, and then we’ll retire to Miami and take life easy. Once that happens, the word *danger* will have nothing to do with us!”

“Nothing at all!”

“Let’s buy a big house. We’ll put in a pool, and we’ll spend all day swimming in it, from morning to night.”

“It’ll be cold at night.”

“Not to worry. If we install about ten stoves, the pool will warm up.”

“*Ten* of them! Amazing, amazing—even the king of the Arabs doesn’t use that many!”

True, desert nights do get chilly, but… There was a marked stupidity about that comment.

“Then we’ll run a railway through the garden, and we’ll take the train from the house to the gate every day.”

“Wow! …But we’ll spend a fortune on tickets that way.”

“This is true. All right, then let’s not have a railway.”

“Still, that’s amazing. Are we really going to be that rich?”

“Absolutely. If I’m with you, Miria, I could even become president! That’s the king of America—the king. Yes, I could become the king, the queen, or even the joker!”

“Queen” would have been physically impossible.

“I don’t really get it, but that’s *amazing*!”

Before they knew it, the pair had been overcome with emotion, and they began to hum jazz music. The alley was their stage, and they took each other’s hands, beginning to dance. The two lovers were lost in a dream——

—and then they got hit by a car.

⇔

“—Are they dead?”

An old man’s voice came from the backseat of the car.

“No… We weren’t going fast. Oh, they’re moving. They probably just lost their balance and fell.”

The voice that returned from the driver’s seat belonged to a young woman.

“In that case, hurry up and go.”

“Yes, sir.”

The car sped up and drove away as if nothing had happened. Finally, once it had exited the alley and turned onto the broad street, the passenger picked up the conversation again: “…Be careful. Why did you hit them?”

“I’m very sorry, sir. I meant to avoid them, but they suddenly started dancing right in the middle of the road… I didn’t brake in time.”

The man was silent for a little while. Then he remembered that the woman driving had never told a senseless lie before.

“…They started dancing?”

“Yes. The man was wearing a tuxedo, and the woman wore a black dress, so… I think they were probably rehearsing for a play.”

“Broadway’s rather far from here.”

“Also… The man was holding hats and…a Japanese helmet in his right hand.”

As one might expect, the man’s eyebrows furrowed.

“…I don’t understand young people these days…”

There was no response from the driver’s seat.

“Hmph… That said, I haven’t been able to comprehend what young people are thinking for a very long time.”

He slowly closed his eyes, continuing to talk to himself.

“Yes… Not for two hundred years or so… Not since that stripling lost his mind. That’s when I stopped trusting anyone younger than myself.”

“…Compared to you, Master Szilard, everyone in the world is younger.”

The voice from the driver’s seat reached his ears. It had interrupted his monologue, but he responded without sounding particularly annoyed.

“Of course. And so I trust no one.”

Those words were the last. Silence enveloped the interior of the car.

The large black automobile the woman was driving stopped in front of a building to the south of Grand Central Station.

A glance around the area revealed the Empire State Building, which was scheduled for completion the following year. Even now, still under construction, it looked down over the city with an air of august dignity.

The female chauffeur got out of the car first, then opened the door to the backseat. The car was a rarity for the time: There was plenty of room in the back.

Szilard Quates got out crossly, then screwed up his already wrinkled face even further. The late autumn sun, which was visible through the canyons between the buildings, clearly illuminated his face.

“…It’s bright.”

The female chauffeur immediately opened a parasol. They covered the paltry five yards from the car to the building’s entrance in their patch of improvised shade.

When they reached the door, the chauffeur used her free hand to insert a key. While they waited in silence for the door to open, Szilard didn’t look at his chauffeur even once.

Inside the building, there was nothing. The rooms had been partitioned, but that was all. The building didn’t seem the slightest bit lived-in. However, you couldn’t simply call it abandoned, either. There wasn’t a single piece of rubbish on the floor, and the walls and electric lightbulbs seemed new, as if the interior construction work had been completed just the day before.

Szilard crossed to an area beside an ascending staircase, then struck the floor several times with his heel.

After a few seconds, the lightbulb that hung on the staircase lit up. When he saw it, he kicked the floor with his heel again, adding one more kick this time.

A short distance in front of him, the floor rose up, and an elderly man’s head peeked out.

“Well, if it isn’t Master Quates! It’s been a very long time, sir!”

“Only twenty years. That’s not so long.”

“Ha-ha-ha… The passage of time is far too different for you than it is for us.”

“Time is a constant. I will admit that we feel it differently.”

As they conversed, the two old men and the woman descended a staircase.

The way he walked didn’t betray his advanced age. Then there they were, in front of him: “Oh, Master Quates.”

“You’re looking very well, sir.”

“You haven’t changed a bit…”

“You truly are a marvelous being…”

On seeing Quates, who hadn’t changed at all in twenty years, about a dozen men let cries of admiration escape them.

The men were of all different ages, but even the very youngest appeared to be around forty. As for the oldest… There were three elderly individuals who seemed as if they might be ninety.

The old man who’d been surrounded looked around at the codgers who’d done the surrounding and spoke with an air of boredom.

“I don’t see Barnes or Stagen.”

The old men glanced at one another, then looked down. The butleresque fellow who’d escorted Szilard delivered the news with a sorrowful mien.

“Master Barnes is currently at the ‘distillery.’ Master Stagen Heim…passed away last year.”

“I see.”

Quates didn’t appear particularly moved by the news.

“There’s nothing to be done about death from old age. If he’d lasted another year, he would have seen this day.”

No one raised an objection to his declaration that the cause of death had been old age.

They understood. They knew they wouldn't die from accidents or illness.

"With failed liquor, I was unable to make your souls eternal… Precisely because sudden death ceased to exist for you, your fear of aging must have been extraordinary. However, even that ends today."

A small cheer echoed through the underground hall.

"…Although there seems to have been a problem of some sort."

Instantly, the cheers were replaced by silence.

"Is it true that the blender died?"

In response to Szilard's query, the butler replied hastily:

"Y-yes, sir… It appears he was stabbed to death by a robber yesterday…"

"What happened to the criminal?"

At that, a man of about forty stepped forward and took over the butler's report.

"Master Szilard. The culprit was just arrested in a *sting operation by police inspectors*. Apparently, he committed his crimes while disguised as a panhandler… He seems to have been a thug with an inclination toward drug addiction, and he was unaffiliated with any syndicate."

"A coincidence, hmm? If that's how things are, I should have added—I don't know his name, but—that blender to our number. Failed product or not, if he'd only had a sip of that, a robber wouldn't have been enough to kill him."

Possibly having something on his mind, Szilard clicked his tongue softly.

"A word, Master Szilard… The man was a dull one, incapable of anything save blending and alchemy. Making him our comrade would have been rather…"

The butler suggested, timidly.

"I see… You're right."

Although you don't seem much different to me. Inwardly, Quates sneered at the old men surrounding him, but aloud, he agreed with them.

"We can simply find another blender. The problem is the finished product. I

assume Barnes is keeping it secure?”

“Yes, we’re told there are about three dozen bottles left.”

“Is he all right on his own?”

“On paper, that place is a wheat storehouse, so there’s no worry of invasion by anyone besides rats. In any case, if we assigned someone who was not a member to act as his bodyguard and that individual found out about the liquor, it would be troublesome…”

Then, do it yourselves. You just don’t want to take responsibility if something goes wrong. Even as Szilard privately despised them, he agreed with the butler’s assessment. He addressed the woman behind him: “Ennis. Take the car and go pick up Barnes and the liquor.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ennis, the female chauffeur, bowed respectfully to Szilard and the old men, then began climbing the stairs, key in hand. Szilard barked one more order at her back.

“Also, if Barnes has touched even a drop of it… Don’t hesitate. Just kill him. If he’s failed to preserve the liquor properly and spoiled it, kill him then, too.”

“…Understood.”

Cold sweat ran down the backs of the old men.

They wouldn’t die from injuries or illness. As long as they didn’t age, they could rely on regenerating even if they fell into boiling lava.

However… The exception was that they could be killed with ease.

The two before them were creatures capable of eliminating them.

Conversely, they had no hope of killing those two.

An absolute terror from which there was no escape.

They would be able to conquer their fear of old age with the “finished product” that had just been completed. However, the terror in front of them would remain.

Unless willing to confront the blade of death those two wielded, their only

alternative was to pledge loyalty.

Loyalty for as long as they lived. In other words, for eternity.

A terror from which only death could free them.

It was a spiral that was somehow contradictory.

⇔

“Look, like I said, you take the oil, and you smear it on a leather glove, like so. Then you light it with a match, and…”

In an East Village alley, pale flames enveloped a gaunt man’s right hand.

“Hey, quit it! You’ll burn your hand off!”

In contrast, his roly-poly companion was scared to death.

“I told you, it’s fine. See, if you press your hand against the wall, like so…”

The gaunt fellow pressed his hand against the wall. Starved of oxygen, the flames vanished instantly.

“See?”

“Whoa… That’s really somethin’.”

These two, “Ghost” Randy and “Meatball” Pezzo, members of the Martillo Family, were scrambling to prepare for the celebratory banquet that would be held that night.

They’d bought too much fuel oil, so they’d opened a can and were entertaining themselves with a dangerous game.

“Huh, there’s still lots left. I guess maybe we shouldn’t’ve gone and opened it.”

“Say, what were we supposed to buy after this?”

“Let’s see… It’d be nice to have some fruit for dessert.”

Where was the nearest greengrocer’s? As Randy considered, Pezzo opened another can of oil.

“Hey, Pezzo, what’re you doing?”

“I wanted to try that hand-burning-thingy you just did. You know. We could maybe use it as a party trick.”

“You mook! Why’d you open a new one?! I just told you, there’s lots left in *this* one!”

“What’s the problem? We’ve got a ton of the stuff.”

The paper bag Pezzo held was packed with a dozen or so cans of oil. They weren’t sure whether it had been a store promotion or what, but there were a dozen can openers in there, too.

“Yeesh. Forget about the oil, what’re we supposed to do with all these can openers? …It’s your fault, Randy. You bought too much.”

“What else could I do? The discount got better the more we bought. This recession’s murder, so we’ve gotta stock up while we can.”

“Yeah, sure, but… If I hadn’t stopped you, all our dough woulda turned into oil.”

As Pezzo said this, laughing, he poured oil onto his glove.

“Randy, light this for me, wouldja? I can’t do it right when I’m holding this bag.”

“No help for that…”

Randy lit a match. Since there might yet have been oil on his glove, he whisked his hands apart quickly as soon as he struck the match.

“Here.”

As he brought the flame closer to his pal’s glove, Randy abruptly realized something.

Hey, his is cloth…

But it was too late. The spark had jumped to Pezzo's big glove, and it blazed up so furiously one could practically hear the roar.

"Whoa! Ain't this too much fire?!"

Startled by flames that were larger than he'd expected, Pezzo hastily shoved his hand against the wall.

However, although his palm was extinguished, the areas that weren't touching the wall still blazed blue, as merrily as ever.

"Hey! It ain't goin' ouuuut!"

"Aaaaah! You idiot! You got oil all the way 'round the back of your hand!"

When Pezzo withdrew his hand from the wall, the flames reclaimed the areas that had been briefly extinguished.

Panicking, he waved his hand, but the fire showed no sign of abating. Quite a lot of oil had soaked into the cloth's fibers, and Pezzo's right hand looked like the wick of a giant candle. He flung the paper bag aside, and the contents of the opened cans splattered over the white wooden walls.

"Dammit! It's getting hot!"

"Calm down! Just take the glove off!"

At Randy's urging, he hastily withdrew the glove, then hurled it away, flailing his hand around like a lunatic.

Aside from some mild blistering on the back, nothing seemed to be seriously wrong with it.

"Ahh… I thought I was a goner…"

"Jiminy Christmas… I really don't want to eat a whole roasted *you*."

"You got *that* right."

"Ha-ha…"

Breathing sighs of relief, the two began picking up the cans they'd scattered everywhere…

…and froze.

The discarded glove had landed right smack on top of the spilled oil…and the flames had migrated not just to the oil but to the wooden building itself. If there was a difference, it was that the color of the flames had changed from blue to red.

Randy quickly scoped out the area, making sure there weren't any witnesses.

Pezzo picked up the paper bag, which fortunately hadn't been burned, and snatched up the oil cans.

Having completed this brilliant combo play, the pair silently exchanged looks, and—

—giving forceful, simultaneous nods, they cheesed it like the wind from the scene of the crime.

⇔

At last, at last, the time has come for my long-cherished wish to be fulfilled.

Life eternal. When I heard tell of it in legends and fables, I snorted at the notion, calling it a hackneyed pipe dream. However, now that I think about it, that ridicule may have been superficial, intended to force myself to understand that my own yearning…could never be reality.

Now, with this "reality" right before my eyes, I can imagine even that ridicule as the material from which my delight in this moment was formed.

A white rat struggles on the desk. This is the reality I sought.

Even this rat is a variety born from Master Szilard's alchemy. In exchange for extraordinary powers of propagation, this short-lived species has a soul that lasts a mere seven days.

However, the specimen before me has already survived fifteen days, and, conversely, has demonstrated no growth whatsoever since the administration of the "liquor" on the third day. With the failed product, growth occurred, indicating that we were unable to halt the phenomenon of aging. On those grounds, we may consider this liquor to be a truly finished product.

I bring the hammer down. There is an unpleasant noise, and a red substance spatters across the desk.

Silently, I watch the small animal, now transformed into something appalling. No matter how many times I see it, the moment before the miracle feels long. When one is certain a miracle is imminent, one becomes all the more impatient for it.

In reality, the silence lasts a mere several dozen seconds, but to me, it feels like hours… No, like the *decades* I have spent waiting for this day.

The separate drops of blood that had spattered onto the desk begin to wriggle, as though each has a will of its own. Even the blood that has soaked into the wood fibers crawls up to the surface, like an adder drawn to the light of the sun. What else could one call this but a miracle?

Before long, the march of blood arrives at its destination: the place where I brought the hammer down. The white rat that has been transformed into a grotesque lump of meat.

It feels as though I am watching time roll back on itself. No, on this desk, at least in regard to the phenomenon of the rat's death, time is indeed flowing backward.

If the flow of time changes, it is a miracle, nothing less than an act possible only for God or a devil. The day has come when I, too, will be added to the system of that miracle.

Yes… The exalted personage who summoned me to this miracle was himself incorporated into it more than two hundred years ago.

Twenty years ago, Master Szilard added me—then a mere Realtor—to the "members." At the time, I had risen in the world of real estate and grown conceited, but looking back, it was a paltry appellation. That mundane title was no more than a tool to be utilized to obtain this gift.

A congressman of my acquaintance (who was also a member, naturally) introduced me to Master Szilard, and at first, I was incapable of giving him credence. …Until Master Szilard severed his own finger, that is.

When I witnessed its regeneration, the childish desire for eternity rose again within me.

Then one day, at last, I obtained the liquor. It was what Master Szilard termed

the failed product, but through it, I acquired an indestructible body. However, the single exception was death from old age. In comparison to the finished product, which conquered even that, I see, yes, it truly was flawed.

Having drunk that failed liquor, I was honored with the role of employing and managing a blender who would create the finished product. I had very little expert knowledge, and I wondered why I had been chosen, but Master Szilard said, “I can’t trust anyone who knows too much about alchemy.” I didn’t understand the reason, but if Master Szilard says it, it cannot possibly be wrong.

In the twenty year interim, I issued orders to the blender and administered the finished product to white rats. The concoction included strong poisons, so there was no fear that the blender would drink it. In fact, white rats that were given liquor other than the finished product died instantly. Either that, or, as with the failed product, they met their deaths through old age.

The heaviest blow came from the Prohibition Act. It struck me as a law created by incompetents, and consequently, considerable obstacles were placed in our path. As the nickname *liquor* suggests, the elixir utilized alcohol as a catalyst, which meant we were rendered unable to own a large factory or procure raw materials in bulk.

However, at this point, even that hardship is a pleasant memory. As I suspected, changing blenders at reasonable intervals does seem to have been the correct course of action. Of course, blenders for whom I had no more use met with fatal accidents.

Thinking that we could continue using him for the coming mass production and that Master Szilard might require him, I made an exception for the most recent blender—the one whose brew had succeeded—and paid him a reward.

However, it may have been that he let the large sum go to his head: I hear he encountered a brigand who robbed him of both his money and his life.

Well, in the end, that was all he was worth.

The miracle is already in our hands. All that remains is to show these results to Master Szilard.

The white rat, which has regained its former shape, begins struggling against

the pain of the nails driven through its feet. What a fortunate rodent. To think it has obtained eternity a step ahead of me.

Growing slightly jealous, I bring the hammer down again.

On the heels of the unpleasant noise, I hear a rapping on the ceiling of the cellar… In other words, on the floor of the room above. Ah, that's a signal from the members. Immediately, I flip the switch. That will have illuminated the lightbulb on the first floor.

There is a short interval, and then I hear the commotion again.

Has Master Szilard come at last? What will the great man say on seeing the three dozen bottles of finished product in this cellar? Then, after that, the time for my liberation from the terror of aging will finally be at hand.

Heart leaping with anticipation, I climb the stairs and open the ceiling.

As my face emerges from the cellar, it is struck by a gust of hot, choking wind.

What is this?

On discovering the source of the rapping, I am aghast.

The shelves on the walls are aflame, and the falling debris has collided with the floor, one piece after another.

One side of the room is colored a fiery red.

Why? Why did this have to happen now? Why a conflagration, now of all times?!

There was nothing here that was flammable!

The liquor… I must haul out the liquor… Hastily, I descend the staircase, go to the crate of finished product and lift… I *can't*! It's heavy, and I am completely incapable of lifting the entire thing!

Even with an indestructible body, then, is my strength unchanged?

Only a little longer… Just a little longer and I will evolve into an exceptional being, and yet… Before that evolution, I remain only a stunted creature…a creature unable to lift a mere thirty-six bottles of liquor?!

Ah——Someone——Someone come to me——*Anyone*——*!*

⇔

“Hey… Maiza, c’mere a second!”

Hearing Firo calling from the street, Maiza poked his head out of the greengrocer’s.

“What is it? …Oh!”

Billows of gray smoke rose over the roof of the shop across the way. It wasn’t that far, probably about two streets over.

“I’m gonna go take a look.”

“Wait, don’t rubberneck. If the police come…”

Firo was carrying the bootleg liquor they’d just bought at a speakeasy. Granted, it was hidden in a crate labeled for another product, but the day the police—particularly Edward—found it, something horrendous would happen.

“It’s fine. I’d never be that clumsy.”

Firo didn’t look particularly worried. With a little wave for Maiza, he ran off.

“Ah… I hope he learns to curb that side of himself after the ritual…”

With a small, wry smile, Maiza also began heading toward the scene, though at a walk.

⇔

“No…”

Having exited the car, Ennis gazed at the rising smoke, wondering if she’d taken a wrong turn somewhere. Or rather, she wished she had.

However, as she stood there, dazed, the small sign on the second floor of the burning building—the one that said Barnes Co. Granary—vividly spelled out the sad reality. The cool expression she’d worn in front of the old men had vanished completely. The situation was simply that abnormal.

“What in the world could have…? Where is Barnes…?”

The young female chauffeur pushed her way through the crowd to stand at the front of the ranks of spectators. Every person she shoved aside regarded her crossly, but the fire soon recaptured their attention, and no one complained enough to impede her progress.

She saw the building's interior beginning to crumble. Even from a distance, she could see that several holes had opened in the street-level flooring. If the finished product had been stored in the cellar, even if she dashed inside now… It would probably be impossible to retrieve.

It was hopeless. How should she report this to Szilard, her master? She herself bore not the slightest responsibility for the situation, but even so, her heart was heavy. It wasn't likely that Szilard himself would fly into a rage, but he would certainly look displeased. What hurt more than that, though, was the realization that the faces of the old men would doubtless appear several times more despairing than her own.

"…Miss. Miss."

At the sensation of a hand on her shoulder, Ennis returned to herself with a jolt.

There was a boy standing in front of her. He seemed to be roughly her age, or maybe a little younger.

"Are you all right? Your face is very pale…"

His manner of speech was mature and didn't match his appearance, but she could tell he seemed to be worried about her.

Had she really let her emotions show in her face so clearly? Hastily pulling herself together, she gave the boy a curt answer:

"Oh… No, it's nothing. Thank you for your concern."

With that, she turned on her heel and pushed her way back through the crowd, making for the outside of the ring of rubberneckers that had formed around the fire.

Barnes, at least, might have managed to escape. With that hope in mind, she quickly disappeared into one of the alleys, intending to search the surrounding streets.

It had been a very cold response, but that being the one given, there was no help for it.

When Firo had reached the fire, a large black passenger car had been parked

beside it.

Initially, he'd been taken aback that the person who'd emerged from the driver's seat was a young woman. The next thing about her—she looked to be a year or two older than he was, but they were probably about the same age—that caught his eye was her clothes. Even though she was a dame, she wore a black two-piece suit, and her boots were sturdy, the sort that soldiers or policemen might wear. It was an entirely unfeminine outfit, but maybe the cloth was very thin… Though it was a suit, it didn't give the impression of being stiff. Even her hair, which was clipped short, could have been considered heresy for women of the day, but… In an odd way, it harmonized with her outfit and actually lent her a bewitching allure.

Firo had been drawn, very slightly, to her countercultural appearance.

Not only that, but, for some reason, the woman had looked more startled than was strictly necessary on seeing the fire, and she'd abruptly started elbowing her way through the crowd in an attempt to get closer.

Finally reaching a spot where she had a better view of the fire—in other words, in front of the other looky-loos—an air of despair, or rather, profound sadness, had seeped into her expression, and she'd seemed rooted to the spot.

Firo had found himself unable to just stand by and watch. He'd pushed his way through the crowd himself and spoken to her, but such had been her response to his efforts. He watched her go, feeling a little disappointed, but…

Huh? She's not heading for the car…?

The automobile in which the woman had arrived had been surrounded by a wave of newcomers. However, she hadn't even bothered to check on it. Instead, she made a beeline for an alley in a completely different direction.

There really must have been something going on. Firo was curious, and at the same time, he wanted to talk with her just a little more. Frankly, it was that "love at first sight" thing.

By the time the balance in Firo Prochainezo's head, wavering between the fire and the girl, had tipped completely toward the latter, he'd already started swimming against the flow of the crowd.

⇦

“That’s weird… Maybe I should’ve taken a right at that last street…”

The streets of New York were laid out like the mesh of a net. They were regular, but because they were so vast, their geometric ranks turned the city into a labyrinth.

He thought he’d been following the girl, but at some point, he seemed to have fallen prey to the urban maze. He’d lived in this city for a long time, the roads home to the hideout, to speakeasies, to all sorts of destinations in his head. However, if the target was a moving person, it was hopeless.

Besides, if he wasn’t mistaken, this was Gandor Family turf.

The Gandor Family was one of New York’s many Mafia outfits, and their scale and the size of their territory weren’t much different from those of the Martillo Family. That said, the men who ran the syndicate, the three Gandor brothers, had a reputation for being merciless and aggressive, and on top of that, all of their members were notorious thugs ready to brawl at the drop of a hat.

“Man… I hope that broad hasn’t gotten herself kidnapped.”

It was a pretty ominous-sounding worry but by no means an empty figure of speech. It was a distinct possibility on this family’s turf.

The guys under the Gandors’ direct supervision are one thing, but since the punks-in-training don’t get bawled out directly by the brothers, it’s tough reining them in…

Pausing to take in his surroundings, Firo picked up on something reminiscent of men shouting. With nothing else to go on, he headed toward the voices.

Turning the corner of an alley, he saw several figures. Four young toughs had a single old man surrounded.

Edging closer, Firo could make out what they were saying. None appeared to have noticed him yet.

“…I said *apologize*, you old fart!”

“Enough of your bushwa…! It was you curs who tripped me!”

Responding to the old geezer’s lip, one of the thugs kicked him in the stomach.

A low groan escaped the old man, and he doubled over.

“Don’t mess with us, Gramps. We said, real polite-like, ‘That’s a heavy-looking box you got there. Want us to carry it for you?’ and do you remember what *you* said? Hmm?”

Another of the toughs, not the one who’d unleashed the kick, lightly smacked his elderly, writhing prey on the cheek.

“‘Get lost, you lowlife scum,’ you said. What a nice, friendly thing to say, huh?”

Another blow. This time he smacked the other cheek. It probably didn’t hurt, those slaps being intended to cause psychological pressure.

“Thanks to that, my leg just sort of stuck itself out there…and because you tripped on it, you got your dirty mites all over it. It’s so itchy I think I’m gonna die. What’re you gonna do about it?”

“What kind of claptrap are you…?”

“Nobody asked for your opinion.”

The one who seemed to be the leader kicked the old man’s shin hard with his toes.

Assailed by violent pain, their victim decided it would be best to just apologize and give them money.

He didn’t have time to bother with this filth. He had a mission to carry out.

“A-all right, I was wrong. If it’s money you w—”

One of the thugs curved his thumb and index finger as if he were holding a golf ball and jabbed them into the geezer’s throat. He couldn’t scream even if he’d wanted to. He couldn’t breathe, either.

“Nobody. *Asked.* How many times are you gonna make me say it?”

The pain was so intense that the old man nearly dropped the crate he was holding. However, grudging even the time it would take to catch his breath, he focused all his nerves on hanging on to the box.

“…What’s up, Gramps? Is that box that important?”

One of the men reached for the crate. At that, although there was no telling

where the old man found the strength, he hugged the box to his chest as if protecting it from his attackers, and tried to run.

However, they tripped him again, and he toppled to the ground.

He'd fallen facedown, and they delivered a vicious kick to his ribs. The same foot was then used to flip him onto his back.

"We'll take that box off your hands. …Not that that means we're letting you off the hook."

Keeping one foot planted on the elderly fellow's stomach to hold him down, the leader bent over, reaching for the box.

Even then, the old man tried to resist. When he attempted to say something, a man in lightweight clothes who'd been standing on the sidelines kicked him in the head.

Overcome by the sensation of his brain rattling in his skull, the old man passed out.

"All right… What's this stuff? Liquor?"

Opening the box, the muggers found two deep-green bottles. A liquid that wasn't water splashed inside the oddly shaped receptacles. It was the way the liquid moved that made them think it wasn't water. When it swayed, there was a subtle density to it.

If this stuff was liquor, why had the old man risked life and limb for it? Could it be terribly expensive liquor? As the leader weighed the possibilities, he noticed a boy watching them from a short distance away.

"…What, punk? What're you looking at?"

Finding himself called out, Firo hesitated, unsure what to do.

If events had unfolded as per the thugs' account, he figured the old man had only gotten what he deserved, so there was no help for it. He did think they'd gone a bit overboard, but it wasn't much different from what he'd done to the slasher just that morning. Of course, at root, there was a significant difference between slander and murderous intent, but Firo didn't particularly concern himself with that.

“Nothing… Anyone would get angry if some old bastard they just met called them ‘lowlife scum.’ That’s only natural. I was just thinking: If you rob him after that, are you prepared to get marked by the cops? Or are you confident you can vanish the coot and wipe your tracks? …Stuff like that.”

The boy’s tone was oddly mature, and the men exchanged suspicious looks.

Their leader baited him, crossly.

“…Hey, punk, listen up. Didn’t your ma teach you to be polite to your elders? Or was she too busy standing on street corners at night to let you suck on her dugs?”

He tossed off a vulgar joke, but his eyes weren’t smiling.

It was the second time today someone had called Firo out on his manners. At that thought, he gave a small sigh, fed up. A cop was one thing, but getting etiquette lectures from *these* guys…

“…I may not be twenty yet, but what about you? The way you talk and act, you really don’t seem any older than me.”

The men went quiet. Seems he’d gotten their goat, but he didn’t care.

“…You’re not from around here, are you, loser.”

“I’m a New Yorker, same as you. Firo, a Martillo Family associate.”

He gave a casual self-introduction, paying them minimal courtesy.

“Martillo? Never heard of ’em… What about you guys?”

The boss’s cronies shook their heads, mocking smiles on their faces.

“…Huhn! Must be a pretty dinky group… Or, what, is it some schoolyard gang?”

“…I think we’re about the same size as the Gandors, the fellas you work under.”

He’d thought he was turning their taunt around on them, but even though it was true, it didn’t appear to have riled them up.

“Huh? Who’re we under, again?”

Weren't they connected with the Gandors? If not, they were swaggering an awful lot… Processing this, Firo waited for them to make the next move.

"Don't go lumping us in with those two-bit posers. We don't answer to nobody. Teaming up the way you guys do just proves you're weak, get it? Just look—even though we've been throwing our weight around here, the Gandors ain't complained even once!"

Ah, so that was how it was. Firo had the gist now.

These guys really were just thugs, in the truest sense of the word. It wasn't that they hadn't joined an outfit. At their level, no one even paid attention to them.

"I see. Never mind, then. Get lost."

At Firo's tone, the toughs' smirks vanished.

"……Say what?"

"I said you're free to go. I had something I wanted to ask you, but it doesn't look like you'll tell me, in which case it'll be a lot easier to look around on my own. Matter of fact, I'm pretty annoyed I wasted any time on you at all, but I'll let you go without decking you, so beat it. Do I really have to spell it all out for you?"

He told them off, all in a breath.

As Firo turned to walk away, one of the men quickly slipped up behind him.

"You little punk! You think you're some kinda big shot?!"

He grabbed Firo's collar, hauling him in.

The boy heaved a small sigh. Then, as if that sigh had been a signal, he went on the offensive.

Swiftly, his left hand went for his assailant's throat. The man had grabbed his collar with his right hand and was unable to react quickly enough to stop it.

Hand at the thug's neck, Firo plunged his index and middle fingers into the base of his throat, just below his Adam's apple.

"_____!!"

A mute scream went up. The tough released Firo's collar and clapped both hands to his throat, collapsing to his knees.

"That's what you just did to that old guy, remember?"

"You sonuva—!"

Another man came swinging at Firo from the side.

He dodged, twisting his upper body lightly, then trapped his opponent's outstretched left arm. At that, the thug hastily tried hitting him with his free hand. However, his stance was unstable, and he couldn't put much force into the blow. Firo grabbed that arm as well.

Both of his arms trapped, the would-be brawler struggled in an attempt to extricate himself from the situation, considered unleashing a kick…but it was too late.

In an instant, still holding the man's arms, Firo had turned away from him. His arms were crossed at the elbows and stretched over Firo's left shoulder.

Then, adjusting his center of gravity as he moved, Firo leaned forward, fast. He thought he heard the elbows crossed on his shoulder creak. Unable to stand the pain in his arms, the tough had forgotten to resist his opponent's move in spite of himself.

Feet off the ground, his equilibrium somersaulted.

In the next instant, a shock ran through his back… Or rather, through his whole body. A numbness seemed to wash over him. The sensation gradually turned into a gnawing pain.

"Whoa… So that's what happens. I'm kinda impressed."

Firo—the one who'd done the throwing—looked more startled than his victim, who only writhed in pain. It was a move he'd learned from a Japanese man in his syndicate, and he'd never managed to throw anyone that well before.

"Gakh…aaah…"

Looking at their companions, who were emitting short groans, the two remaining thugs swallowed hard. They should have gone at him all at once, four on one, but they seemed to have underestimated the boy and found themselves

idling by the old man.

This kid was bad news. The ringleader was just beginning to register the true skills of the boy in front of him.

Meanwhile, his buddy already had his knife out and was pointing the tip of its blade at Firo.

“…Aww… You drew? Seriously?”

His expression looked troubled, but inside, Firo was as composed as ever.

Moving casually, he closed the gap between himself and the two-bit muggers, raising both hands:

“C’mon, now. There’s no need to bring shivs into a fight like this, is there?”

“Shaddup! It’s way too late to go all diplomati—”

Midsentence, a shock ran through his knife hand. Firo had nailed it with an unerring toe kick. Involuntarily, the man dropped the knife. The metal bounced a bit when it struck the pavement, and Firo kicked it out of reach.

“Uh…”

By reflex, the attacker’s eyes followed the blade.

From the lower edge of his field of vision, something closed in on him.

By the time he realized that “something” was Firo’s fist, it was too late. He took a powerful blow below the nose, a kick to the stomach, and ended up rolling around on the ground.

“And? What’ll it be?” Firo asked, turning to face the leader.

The man’s hand was still inside his jacket.

“From now on, save the kiddie games for school.”

Firo returned the insult he’d received a few moments earlier. But it was unclear whether or not the man left standing had been listening as he walked over to the crony who’d grabbed Firo’s shirt at the outset and been laid out. That man had since gotten up, but was still rubbing his throbbing throat. After exchanging two or three words, they each booked it to one of their fallen crew, lent them a shoulder, and hauled them to their feet.

With a final, hate-filled glare at Firo, the men took off running.

That left just Firo and the unconscious old coot.

“Hey, Gramps! Gramps! …You all right?”

At the sensation of a hand smacking his cheek, Barnes came to.

He sat up hastily. There was no pain. The internal bleeding and broken bones seemed to have fully “recovered.”

In front of him, he saw the face of a lad who looked younger than the earlier group. The youth seemed to be bending down, watching him. And—— Barnes still held the crate.

On confirming that fact, Barnes sighed in relief. Then he shot a suspicious glance at Firo.

Had this boy saved him? He couldn’t imagine that the young man had run that gang off all by himself, but at any rate, the crate was safe. Barnes was worried about its contents, but when he opened it a crack and looked, the bottles were fine as well, their contents safely inside.

“It’s more important than you? Whatever’s in that box?” Firo asked, sounding highly interested.

At that, Barnes immediately closed the lid and shouted, hugging the crate to him more tightly than before:

“S-silence! It’s nothing to do with scoundrels like you! Are you after this liquor as well?! If it’s money you want, I’ll give you as much as you ask for, so begone!”

“…Hey. That’s a fine thing to say to the guy who saved your life… I think I get how the other guys felt.”

He grimaced as he spoke, but he didn’t seem to be all that upset.

“By the way, Gramps. Did you see a lady wearing a lightweight black suit?”

Barnes was momentarily confused by the abrupt and incomprehensible question. A woman in a suit! All that came to mind was some theater somewhere… But when his imagination had taken him that far, he realized it *did* remind him of someone.

Master Szilard's chauffeur…

Barnes had spoken with Ennis several times, in order to contact their employer. She was the only being beside Szilard who could kill him.

"No… No idea."

"I see… Never mind, then. Sorry to have disturbed you."

After those few words, Firo hurried on, all interest in the old man forgotten.

As Barnes watched him go, he wondered: Why was the young man looking for Master Szilard's chauffeur? The thought distracted him, and that distraction kept him from noticing something important: Why hadn't Firo been all that upset by the way he'd spoken to him?

If Barnes had only caught on, the destinies of Firo and the others might have changed dramatically (his own not withstanding).

Unfortunately, Barnes never did catch on.

Quietly, the tracks of destiny began to spiral.

And now, Barnes was walking through the alleys alone.

If he'd kept to the main streets, he would have attracted fewer troublemakers, but he didn't have time to take the long way around. He had to make his way to the building where the great man waited as quickly as possible. Once eternity was his, he'd promptly have that group of ruffians meet with a lethal accident.

Or rather, will *I obtain eternity, in the end? While it was an accident, I was only able to protect two bottles of the finished product. As punishment, I may be killed by Master Szilard. No, in all probability, I will be killed. There's no help for that, though. After all, I was unable to fulfill the mission his exalted personage entrusted to me.*

However, just perhaps——

That desperate hope was all that kept Barnes's feet moving.

He didn't have to think about anything anymore. He simply had to reach his goal.

But heartless destiny had taken the form of a human hand, and it was closing

in on Barnes's back.

It grabbed his collar from behind, yanking him backward.

He was spun around roughly, and a voice loaded with anger sounded in front of his face.

"You alone, old fart?"

Standing there was the group of four he'd intended to have meet with a fatal accident.

"You must really want us to drink that liquor for you."

With both arms and legs broken, unconscious from the pain, Barnes was thrown away in a garbage dump.

When Ennis found him, his bones still hadn't completely regenerated.

⟺

Not far from that garbage dump, there was a jazz hall. Its basement held an office that could be considered the headquarters of the Gandor Family, who ran this territory.

Jazz from the establishment upstairs filtered through the ceiling. With this as their background music, a dozen raucous men drank liquor, laughed, and raged.

The participants were obviously not upstanding citizens, and they were doing whatever they pleased across the cramped space.

However, there was one solitary spot where discipline reigned.

Four men sat at a round, central table while ten men stood around the perimeter, watching the action on the table. They seemed to be playing poker.

Of the game's seated men, three looked as if they were peacefully enjoying the mood, but the fourth wore an oddly tense expression.

Trembling slightly, the man spoke.

"Uh…um… This, uh, this is rare, Boss… All three of you playing poker, together…"

Jorgi, who was responsible for managing some of the syndicate's money, had spoken as if gauging the mood of the three brothers who sat at the table with

him.

"……"

Across from him to the left, Keith Gandor—the oldest of the three Gandor brothers, the syndicate's bosses—said nothing. Jorgi had been part of the outfit for five years, but he'd never seen this man open his mouth.

"Shaddup, Jorgi! When you're playing poker, you yak *silently*!"

The one sitting directly across from him and saying impossible things was the second oldest, Berga Gandor. Although he was the middle brother, he had the sturdiest build of the three, and he was twice as big as his older brother, Keith. He also had a short fuse that was lit often.

"Calm down, Berga… They say yelling chases your luck away. I'm sorry about that, Jorgi."

The calm fellow on his right was Luck Gandor, the youngest. Although he was only twenty or so, he handled a number of important duties due to his natural foresight and social skills.

For this country, Luck was a strange man: He always wore a faint smile, and he spoke politely to anyone who was older than he was, even if they were his subordinate. However, Jorgi knew: The only part of his face that was really smiling was his lips, and there was always a hard-boiled light in his eyes.

"Uh… No… Thank you…"

Frog in his throat, Jorgi silently arranged his cards.

He was afraid something terrible might happen later if he was foolish enough to win in company like this. Pragmatically, he decided to keep playing with a garbage hand.

"Oh, hey! I just thought of something good!"

When all the players had finished adjusting their hands, Berga, who'd said to yak silently, yelled.

"Why don't we have the guy who ends up last do *this*, on top of paying the money?!"

He casually pulled out a black lump and tossed it onto the table.

It was a revolver.

His older and younger brothers just gazed at their own hands silently.

“Uh…um…Mr. Berga?”

“You know! Russian Roulette!”

Jorgi felt his vision darken slightly.

“Um… You, uh… You’re kidding, right? …Somebody’s gonna die…”

“No worries! You won’t die if you don’t get lucky!”

“That’s crazy…”

He looked at Luck, hoping for help, but Luck was still gazing at his cards. He didn’t respond.

“All right… We’re all gonna show our cards at once.”

The intensity of Jorgi’s trembling doubled. If he showed his cards now, there was no doubt that he’d end up putting that muzzle to his temple.

He’d have to switch a few out. Jorgi was pretty confident in his cheating abilities. He had a few cards up his sleeve, just in case. If he used those, at the very least he’d manage three of a kind.

He was uncomfortable cheating his own family’s bosses, but it was far better than being forced into a game of Russian Roulette.

Jorgi looked up, intending to watch his opponents for openings…and instantly froze.

Eyes.

A dozen or so pairs of eyes were focused coldly on Jorgi’s hand.

Keith, Berga, Luck, the onlookers who stood around the table, even the guys who hadn’t been anywhere near the poker table until that point: Everyone had stopped what they were doing and turned to look at Jorgi.

Since absolutely everyone had frozen, silence very nearly ruled the basement. The only thing that opposed it was the faint jazz music that came through the

ceiling. However, its lukewarm volume only heightened Jorgi's fear.

His terror was so great he couldn't even tremble. The passage of time seemed to have gone whacky, too. Somehow managing to hang on to his will through what felt like impending insanity, he squeezed the words out.

"……Wha…? Ah… No… Wh… Wh-wha…wha…wh-what's the matter with…all of you…? Is there s-s-s-s-something st-st-st-st-stuck to m-m-m-m-my h-h-h-h-h-hand?"

It was as if the repressed physical trembling was being released from his body through his voice. Watching this absurd version of Jorgi, Berga answered—unusually—in a calm tone:

"…Hmm? Nah… They're just watching to make sure you don't cheat. Don't worry about it."

Jorgi's heart very nearly stopped.

It couldn't be—They couldn't possibly—Did they know? No, they couldn't, it couldn't be that.

Desperately, he tried to look calm. If he panicked now, they might suspect even the things they hadn't noticed yet.

"Ha…ha-ha… C'mon, Mr. Berga… Me, cheat? I'd never… Right, Mr. Luck?"

"Oh, if it was just cheating, I think you'd manage quite easily."

Luck's lips curved as he spoke. As usual, his eyes weren't smiling.

"You've been embezzling the syndicate's money for two years now, after all."

This time, Jorgi found himself completely unable to move.

They knew. They knew. They knew-knew-knew it-knew it-k-k-k-kill, they'll kill me, they'll kill

He tried to say something, but his jaw only flapped up and down, and he couldn't even breathe the way he wanted to. Only the amount of sweat down his back accurately showed his terror.

"Did you think we had knotholes for eyes? Well, no, we didn't notice for two whole years, so that may be an accurate assessment…"

As he looked down at Jorgi, whose lips were quivering violently, Luck spoke dispassionately.

"…We heard that a drug addict had been wandering around this area recently, you see… We were concerned that someone from our family might be involved, so we looked into it a bit."

If small outfits like the Gandor or Martillo Families got into the drug trade, it could turn the surrounding syndicates against them unnecessarily. Of course, the fact that they didn't deal in drugs also helped project a clean image to the people who paid them protection money.

"…However, in the process, we noticed something completely unrelated. Jorgi… Your books… The flow of money is too regular. It's unnatural. So you see, we took those books and asked around a bit, and… You know the rest, don't you, Jorgi? You're a smart guy…"

Jorgi wasn't listening anymore. His hollow gaze wandered through space.

"…As it turns out, that addict was caught by the police this morning, and we learned he had nothing to do with our territory, but… Are you listening, Jorgi?"

Jorgi's ears couldn't hear a thing. The sweat that poured off him showed his state of mind, just as it was.

Deciding that saying more would be a waste of time, Luck laid his cards on the table.

"Aces, five of a kind."

Then Berga slapped his cards down.

"Arrrgh! I lost, I lose! Five kings!"

Finally, Keith quietly showed his cards.

"……"

Five jokers, all in a row.

"You take everything, huh, Keith?"

"I'm no match for you, Keith."

In response to this supremely bald-faced cheating, the men around the table

cackled with laughter. The only one not laughing was Jorgi.

There were seven jokers on the table. Jorgi felt as if the Deaths drawn on them were watching him and smirking.

Then, when the men's laughter had died down, Luck spoke quietly.

"Hurry and show us yours, Jorgi."

As if prompted by Luck's words, Jorgi's cards slipped from his motionless hand, fluttering to the table. Two landed facedown; Luck turned them over. …Once all five were visible, it was obvious to everyone that the hand was garbage.

"Okay… Remember that rule I just told you about, Jorgi? Do ya?"

Berga tossed the revolver that had been in the center of the table so that it landed in front of Jorgi. The bullets… There were six. Every chamber was full.

"All right: Russian Roulette. This version is no-fail, every shot a winner. Make it a good one."

Now that it looked as if he really might die, Jorgi was terribly calm.

Why do I have to die? The money would have gone to guys who were all brawn and no brain; all I did was use it for them. If you think about it that way, I've done quite a lot for the world. And now I'm going to get the kiss-off from these guys…? Idiots who don't even know how to make money? I won't stand for it. There has to be a way out of this alive.

What surfaced in his mind was not regret or repentance, but hatred for the fate he'd earned for himself.

He looked at the revolver in front of him. Then he looked at the people who stood around him. None of them had a hand on their own gun or knife.

There, you see? That's what makes these guys idiots.

Slowly, Jorgi picked up the revolver, brought it to his temple, and——

"————!"

Suddenly, he thrust the gun out in front of him and squeezed the trigger. Straight at the three brothers, his own bosses, across from him.

He pulled the trigger once…twice…three times, four, five, six……

Click

Click Click

Click-click-click

No fire erupted.

All that echoed through the quiet basement was the metallic sound of the hammer striking. It blended with the jazz that filtered down from the floor above, creating an odd ensemble that lingered in Jorgi's ears.

"…That's very unfortunate, Jorgi."

Luck spoke sadly. Unusually for him, his eyes really did appear sad.

"Take a good look… Those're all blanks."

Berga spoke dispassionately, his face expressionless.

Jorgi was stunned; he had no idea what had happened. Luck handed down the verdict:

"…Listen, Jorgi. The three of us were grateful for all the work you'd done for us. We talked it over and came to a decision. If you steeled yourself and pulled the trigger yourself, we'd let you leave the group without a word. If you cried and begged for your life, we'd beat you half to death and let you leave. If you denied everything to the end, we'd cut your tongue out and let you leave. And… you chose the very worst outcome. I can't tell you how unhappy I am about that."

At that point, Luck shook his head and said nothing more.

This time, Jorgi really did despair and regret what he'd done. If he'd at least begged for his life…

Even now, it might not be too late. Just as he opened his mouth to speak——

A gigantic shoe was shoved into it.

Berga had suddenly jumped up onto the table and kicked Jorgi's face the way a kid would kick a ball.

"…Don't you make my brothers any sadder."

Eyebrows drawn together in a scowl, he looked down at the degenerate who lay on the floor. The lightbulb that hung right beside Berga's head was swinging violently.

Several of Jorgi's teeth had left his mouth, and the whites of his eyes showed under slightly opened eyelids. Apparently, the attack had knocked him out cold.

Seeing this, several of the men who'd been watching the poker match began to move. They picked up Jorgi's body and stuffed it into a gunnysack. Then two of them lifted the sack…and climbed the stairs to the ground floor.

After this, the gunnysack would be driven outside the city and taken to a place with a view of the ocean.

Jorgi was only unconscious now, but he would probably never wake up again.

The man who knew his fate quietly stirred the vocal chords he almost never used.

"……Damn fool…"

The only ones who heard Keith's soft murmur were his two younger brothers.

A few minutes after the gunnysack had made its exit, a member who'd been in the jazz hall came down.

"Luck… Dallas's group says they want to see you."

Dallas? Who was that? Several names and faces flickered through Luck's mind.

Then he recalled the faces of the punks who'd been playfully tearing up the neighborhood.

"That's fine. Confiscate their 'toys' beforehand, if you would."

After a short while, a weary-looking group of four entered.

On seeing them, Luck got the vague feeling that these clowns had just lost a fight. That made it pretty easy to guess why they were here.

And on the whole, his guess proved correct.

"—So, this Firo punk: Could you do something about…?"

“No, gentlemen.”

Luck spoke firmly before they’d finished their story. The other men seemed to be about his age, but apparently he’d decided to respond politely anyway.

“What obligation do we have to help you get your revenge?”

“Well… No… I mean… Some guy from somewhere else is doing whatever he wants around here!”

“You aren’t members of our syndicate. As such, there’s no need for you to worry about our ‘business.’ That said, if the people who contribute to us were to come to us about the matter, we’d spare no pains in addressing the issue…”

This was a fact. In general, small outfits like theirs were built on the trust (or, in some cases, the fear) of the citizens who paid them protection money.

“…Hey, we drop money at your speakos, too.”

“And in exchange, you’re given liquor, correct? I would think that makes us even.”

“Then let’s do it this way, Mr. Luck. If you help us out, we’ll pledge allegiance to your syndicate. That’s a pretty good deal, isn’t it?”

All the strength nearly drained out of Luck’s body. How could they possibly overestimate themselves this much? Not only that, but right after they’d been thrashed by one guy!

Deciding there was no point in continuing the discussion, Luck made up his mind to disclose everything honestly.

“Listen, Dallas… Didn’t you ever wonder why we never contacted you? You can’t have imagined we’d turned a blind eye to your arrogant behavior because we were afraid of you, can you? Frankly, we didn’t invite you to join our syndicate because you didn’t seem as if you’d be the slightest bit of use to us. If we ever end up in a gunfight with the police, I suppose we could use you as shields, but we’d rather not pay human shields a weekly salary. And we didn’t interfere with you…”

He paused.

“…in order to keep the eyes of the police elsewhere. While you play at being

bandits, they take less trouble investigating us."

He hadn't been thinking anything of the sort, but it was probably better to say at least that much. If they took these jokers in as members, they'd only be marked more firmly by the police, and Dallas's crew was certain to get in the way.

When he looked, all four men were watching him, red-faced. He didn't think they were foolish enough to make trouble inside a Mafia hideout, but he couldn't afford to be careless.

"…Hey… You sure spout off enough. What do you actually know about us, huh?"

"At the very least, I know one lone boy who seemed obviously younger than you beat you like rugs. Since you just told me so yourselves, I doubt there's any mistake."

"Why you little—!"

Dallas, the leader, made no attempt to stop his angry companion. They probably meant to show off their courage and skills, but that method was effective only when the minimum of courtesy was observed.

"Fugwahah!"

The one who'd made the first move fell to the floor with a loud crash. When he glanced over, Berga was standing beside him, fist clenched.

"Berga."

"Luck… What's with these mannerless scumbags?"

After a little thought, the youngest brother answered:

"I don't know them."

"I see. You don't know 'em, huh? Then they're trespassing, right?"

"I was very nearly killed."

"You were, huh? Then this is legitimate self-defense."

Confronted with Berga cracking his knuckles, the remaining three men were paralyzed for an instant.

“There’s an idea, Dallas. If you manage to beat Berga, we’ll acknowledge your skills.”

Berga was in a bad mood, and unlike Firo, he wasn’t about to stop beating them once they were down. His long, thick leg stomped on the face of the man who’d fallen first, over and over.

Three minutes later… Four men who were even more tired—or rather, torn up—than they had been when they arrived were making tracks retreating from the office.

After the four had been run out of the basement, Luck discovered something they’d left behind.

“What’s this crate…? Liquor?”

There were two liquor bottles inside the crate. Had they belonged to the men who’d just left? If so, they could throw them away or drink them with impunity, but if they were wrong, it would be a serious matter.

I’ll ask whose they are when everyone’s here tomorrow.

Luck set the crate on top of the safe, then began busily preparing to go out with his brothers.

Quietly, the spiral of destiny turned.

⇔

When I wake, the great man himself is standing before me.

Master Szilard. My lord, and the one for whom I have the highest regard.

I look around, and my surroundings strike me as familiar. That’s right: This is the members’ meeting place…near Grand Central.

“Ennis… Why didn’t you kill him?”

He doesn’t look at me. He seems to be reprimanding the female chauffeur, who is near the entrance.

“Sir. I thought we could do that after we found out what happened.”

The elderly members are lined up behind Master Szilard. Every face seems despairing. Although they are grown men, some are crying. Others are glaring

at me with hatred in their eyes. The emotions, both despair and hatred, seem to gain in ferocity in proportion to their ages.

Oh, I see. They're grieving over the fact that I failed to protect the finished product. A politician who seems unlikely to last another year is actually bawling.

"Hmph… Enough sophistry. You can kill strangers with no hesitation, but the moment it's someone you know even slightly, you balk. 'Find out'…?"

Master Szilard's hand is approaching my face.

Oh. Then I am going to be killed.

However, there's no help for that. After all, I was unable to carry out my mission.

To think that I let even the last hope—those two bottles of finished product—be stolen, and by ne'er-do-wells like those. I must consider myself honored simply to be executed by Master Szilard himself.

"All we need to do to find out…is this."

Master Szilard sets his palm on my head.

Immediately, "it" is snatched away from within me. If asked what "it" is, the only answer I can give is "everything." I can feel all the blood in my body gathering in my head. It isn't only blood, though. I can feel my muscles shriveling and drying up, starting at my toes. I feel the desiccated flesh crumbling, being drawn into my body. Ah, my legs are gone already.

My memories… I can feel my memories being siphoned away. …Oh… Come to think of it, everything I am will become part of Master Szilard. In a way, does that not mean I will gain eternal life? But why was it I wanted eternal life?

Oh, I've disappeared up to my stomach. Hurry, I have to hurry and remember. But why is my stomach gone? Oh, the man in front of me is Master Szilard. That's right, Master Szilard is punishing me. But why am I being punished, I wonder… OH, THAT'S RIGHT, I WASN'T ABLE TO CARRY OUT MY MISSION. BUT WHAT MISSION WAS IT? I CAN'T REMEMBER NOW. THAT'S RIGHT, THERE WAS SOMETHING I HAD TO REMEMBER.

OH, OF COURSE. I REMEMBER, I REMEMBER EVERYTHING.

I WANTED ETERNAL LIFE BECAUSE I THOUGHT…

…I COULD BECOME A HERO, LIKE THE ONES IN MYTHS AND LEGENDS…

…AND PROTECT THIS LAND.

NO, THAT'S WRONG, IT WASN'T THE LAND.

MOMMY. IT WAS TO SAVE MOMMY. FROM THAT GUY, THE ONE WHO HIT HER EVERY DAY.

WHO WAS THAT GUY? I CAN'T REMEMBER. I REMEMBER HE DIED IN AN ACCIDENT.

HE DIED IN AN ACCIDENT. WITH MOMMY.

WHAT'S A MOMMY? I CAN'T REMEMBER.

WHAT IS REMEMBERING?

AH…

AH…

…

It was a grotesque sight.

The moment Szilard placed his hand on Barnes's head, Barnes began to shrivel up.

No, the expression shrivel up wasn't the right one. In the areas from which the moisture seemed to have disappeared, the flesh crumbled, and the pulverized flesh was absorbed into the remaining surface… In a word:

He was eaten by Szilard's right hand.

That was the perfect way to describe it.

Starting at the tips of his toes, Barnes's body was erased from this world.

In the end, his head—the last remaining thing—broke apart, crumbled, and disappeared into Szilard's right hand as if it had been sucked into a vacuum cleaner.

The faces of all the old men in the room were pale. There was no longer any crying to be heard. If they took one step out of this room… These men had

substantial rank and honor, but right now they were no more than a group of old men dominated by the horror that had occurred before their eyes.

“All right, gentlemen.”

The one to break that silence was the author of that horror, Szilard himself.

“I’ve read his memories, and until the very end… Yes, even as I killed him, he held me in high regard and pledged loyalty to me. …Truly magnificent! I encourage you gentlemen to follow his example!”

The end result was a pile of clothes on the floor, complete with shoes.

The line sounded like a very unfunny joke, but he’d said it in all seriousness, and of course no one was laughing.

“…And rejoice: He appears to have managed to save two bottles of finished product from the fire.”

After a moment’s pause, a commotion rose among the old men. The room that had been enveloped in terror and despair was about to take an abrupt turn into joy.

“Although it seems they were stolen.”

That joy faded instantly.

“Well, I know where they were stolen, and the faces of the ones who took them. If we’re lucky, we should be able to reclaim them.”

Once again, a commotion went up from the group of old men. To them, letting this chance slip through their fingers meant being forced to accept death. To Szilard, who was already ageless, it meant only that the completion of the elixir would be delayed, but to those who were hounded by old age and had already grown elderly, it truly was a matter of life and death.

In front of the group of old men with glittering, hungry eyes, Szilard was thinking of other things.

Even if the finished product has been created, there’s no sense in giving it to these good-for-nothings. For one with a heart as loyal as Barnes’s, I would have considered it, but in the end, he died, too. …Well, I did kill him myself, but still.

What I want isn't trifling rank or money. It's absolute loyalty…and perfect knowledge. That's all. As soon as it's completed…I'll have no use for them. They can vanish, go to nourish my knowledge. …Hmph. That said, I expect most of their knowledge is unpalatable, and I fear it may lie heavy on my mind.

While he'd had his faithful "tools" create the finished product for him, Szilard had been engaged in his own separate, independent research. That research involved his own body, and through it, he'd learned several important things. Although, since he hadn't yet fully verified them, they were still only in the realm of conjecture.

First, regarding the reason my body regenerates. We seem to have died at the point in time when we drank that liquor. Or, no, not died… It may be more accurate to say we were reborn.

As the result of a wide range of repeated experiments, he'd deduced that his immortal body resembled a colony of living organisms. Even if he was cut into pieces, each individual part tried to re-form the original, aggregate whole.

More than on the cellular level… It's as though each individual molecule—no, each atom—has been transformed into a living organism.

Once, he'd burned an alchemist who'd come to eat him, but the smoke hadn't been carried away by the wind. Instead, it had continued to envelop the man as he burned, and had disappeared when the fire went out and he regenerated. Considering the fact that regeneration occurred even from ash, the phenomenon seemed to extend beyond the molecular level.

In 1897, the British scientist Thomson had discovered the electron; in 1911, his student Rutherford discovered the atomic nucleus, and knowledge of the existence of particles smaller than atoms began to spread around the world.

At the rate they're going, in two or three years they may discover another new particle. How deep and subtle is this transformation into living organisms, I wonder? …That said, even given another hundred years, scientists who dwell in sensible society will never be able to understand this immortality. I can clearly sense principles beyond the science of this world at work. …Regardless, I have serious doubts about whether science can be applied to power gained from summoning a demon.

In that case, instead of inducing a scientific reaction, was that liquor a medium used to summon the laws of some other world into this one? He'd promoted the manufacture of the finished product based on the "knowledge" of a compatriot who'd been researching that angle… Since this distillation had succeeded, that inference seemed to have been correct.

And another thing: The colony phenomenon itself was the reason behind both "eating" and "being unable to give false names." These particle-sized living organisms that gathered around the "intellect" of an immortal were strongly attracted to one another. In other words, the act of eating was probably an act of fusion, based in one intellect and performed through its right hand. A colony of bees has no use for two queens. So too does only one intellect remain.

Then there was the issue of false names. He'd been able to give false names to ordinary humans. However, when he tried to do so with immortals, or to write his name on documents…

No matter what I do, I am unable to give a false name. The demon called it a restriction set on our spirits, but…it felt as though all the cells in my body, from head to toe, were giving me an order. I felt a pulsation, a "trembling," not from my head, but directly from my body. …In all probability, every member of this colony of cells wants to fuse with others of its kind… Is that why they won't let us hide ourselves completely?

However, he had been able to grant a false name to temporary immortals to whom he'd given the failed product.

Apparently they know the other is not the same species meant to be fused with, but simply "food"… Kuh-kuh-kuh… What a truly well-designed system.

That said, many things were still unexplained, such as the question of where the mass of humans who were "eaten" went. Szilard was irritated that the gaps in the knowledge he wanted were not being filled in.

If he'd known how to blend the finished product, at least, he would have been a little closer to perfect knowledge, but…

…the man's little brother had known only half the blending method.

He'd come to New York this time around in order to eat the man who'd

discovered the method, but in the end, it had been a wasted trip. Well, once he acquired the actual finished product, no doubt he'd be able to analyze the blending method on his own. He didn't care about the order of events, as long as he ultimately gained knowledge and the finished product.

Either way, if I acquire a complete body of knowledge, loyalty and wealth will follow. For that reason as well, first I need the finished product…

The way to summon the demon, and the complete method for blending the liquor of immortality.

Detestable stripling. You who know both these things—both pieces of knowledge I do not know—simultaneously…

Where are you hiding?

"…And by the way, Ennis. It seems there's a man who's looking for you."

Ennis was slightly bewildered by her master's words. She had absolutely no idea who it could be.

"Let's see… I'm able to share knowledge with you as well, in reverse. I'll show you now."

No sooner had he spoken than Szilard laid his left hand on Ennis's head. Their audience's eyes went wide, but Ennis accepted it silently. There was a brief pause, and then faces appeared in her mind.

A group of four thuggish men. She also knew that they were the ones who had stolen the finished product. The face that appeared next belonged to the man who was looking for her. Who could he be? She felt as if she'd met him somewhere, but she couldn't remember where it had been.

"…In any case, look for that group of four."

"Yes, sir."

Ennis left the room again. As he watched her go, Szilard grew a little concerned.

He didn't think it was possible, but could the man who was searching for her be one of his former comrades?

No, it couldn't be that. No one knows about Ennis. I ate everyone who knew what she really is. There are no longer any alchemists who know about Ennis, and if they attack her without knowing, it does me no harm. There was even one who thought she was a mere human, got careless, and was eaten.

…Come to think of it, that was when it began. When Ennis grew hesitant to dispose of companions. She may have acquired some uncalled-for knowledge.

Well, never mind. Either way, if she becomes an obstacle, I'll simply get rid of her.

Killing her was far easier than "eating."

Ennis disappeared through the hole in the ceiling.

Szilard closed his eyes. His lips curved into a smirk.

⟺

"Yes… I'm Assistant Inspector Edward Noah."

The salute Edward gave had more spirit in it than the one he regularly used for his superintendent.

The pair in front of him were special agents from the Bureau of Investigation. It wasn't that they outranked the superintendent. It was only that Edward would begin his training with them next week, and they would be senior members of his new force. This, in combination with the fact that he'd longed for this promotion, made the two men seem several times more dazzling to him than his boss.

"Uh… Thank you for your service. Erm… I'm Bill Sullivan, and this is—"

"Donald Brown here."

Brown, who stood beside the thin Sullivan, introduced himself while interrupting his partner. He had a powerful build, and the fist that lightly clasped Edward's hand seemed twice as big as Edward's own.

His supervisor had told him about this in advance. Apparently, these two had come in pursuit of suspects from a multi-state string of robberies. Edward had been ordered to cooperate with their investigation as a member of the local police force.

“So… I think you’ve probably heard, but I’ll give you a brief rundown. Uh… Take a look at this photograph…”

As a point of fact, all Edward had been told was that there was a string of robberies and thefts, which meant this would be the first time he’d heard any details.

The photo he was handed showed a man and woman who were wrapped in bandages from head to toe. He knew one was a woman, because she was wearing a wedding dress over the bandages. Parenthetically, the one who was probably a man wasn’t wearing anything except the bandages. He was wrapped up so well that the only things exposed were his eyes and mouth, so in a sense, there was no real problem, but…

“……”

For several seconds, Edward was silent.

Was this a Bureau of Investigation–style joke?

When he looked unsure how to respond, Bill gave a wry smile and explained.

“Uh… How should I put this? Hmm… Those two really are the suspects. That photo was taken by a newspaper reporter, out of curiosity. Apparently they were quite happy to let themselves be photographed. Uh… And then, you see. I’m not sure how to put it…”

Donald, seemingly unable to put up with his partner’s hemming and hawing any longer, picked up the explanation:

“Right afterward, those two committed a robbery. When the police came running, all they found were the bandages and the wedding dress, dropped in an alley. The only thing all the witnesses said was ‘Bandages,’ see? They had no solid leads.”

I see. It made sense; if they initially struck in flashy clothes then disguised themselves, their chances of making a successful getaway increased significantly. …If they managed to make their flashy outfits blend in a bit beforehand, that is.

“They’ve also worn black masks and cloaks, and top hats and canes—Anyway,

weird outfits. So far, they've committed more than eighty robberies and burglaries."

"Then…why hasn't anyone been able to catch these jokers before now?"

He thought it was a rude question, but he really had to ask it.

"Uh… How should I put it…? Because the damage they did was, um, what it was…they hadn't made it onto the Bureau's investigation list until now. Uh… The first one was clocks, if I recall. Then chocolate and candy… Once they stole the doors from a museum. Just the doors."

Edward sighed inwardly. Did the Bureau of Investigation detectives have to run all over the country chasing nuts like these?

"However, as you'd figure, the one they pulled in New Jersey last month was a problem. They stole the millionaire Mr. Genoard's legacy, down to the last cent."

Edward hadn't heard of that particular incident.

"…But that wasn't in the papers, was it?"

"Mr. Genoard's relations wouldn't let it be made public. They said it would bring shame on their entire family."

What a selfish lot. Criminals threw their weight around in the world because people like those existed. Edward very nearly fumed, but, considering that keeping the papers silent hadn't really changed anything, he suppressed it.

"Still, weren't any of the previous heists in the news? Granted, what they stole was… But even so."

"Yeah, 'Scarface' and Luciano are all everyone's been talking about lately."

Scarface. Alphonse Capone's famous nickname.

"Ah… Scarface, hmm…? When he moved to Chicago, and everyone thought he'd risen to the top… He wasn't even thirty yet, you know. He's only about thirty-one now. A kid from Brooklyn becoming this big boss, Public Enemy Number One, before you know it… I tell you, American history doesn't have many legends like the one he's built."

“Let’s not talk about that lowlife.”

It was true that Capone had raced up through the ranks of the underworld at a young age. In that sense, he’d had innate talent, and he may also have been a hard worker. However, Edward refused to acknowledge either talent or effort in criminals.

“Mm… In any case, it seems as though the preferred stance of both our muckety-mucks and the ones in government is that ‘the Mafia doesn’t exist,’ you know… They say even Capone is ‘just a thug’… It’s always us little guys that get stuck with the real trouble. Ah… What a hassle.”

As his partner criticized the higher-ups with a wry smile, Donald mildly admonished him. “Bill… Watch what you say. If those ‘muckety-mucks’ decide they don’t like you, they’ll ruin your life just like that.”

“Ooh… Scary, scary. I’m not sure it’s a good thing to have bosses that are scarier than Capone…”

Donald laughed, just a little. Then he sobered up again and spoke to Edward.

“Well, we’re not Capone’s only enemies. I doubt the New York Mafia thinks very kindly of him… He’s done too much killing.”

That was a fact. The several huge Mafia syndicates that controlled New York weren’t pleased with Capone’s heavy-handed methods. They’d even begun to talk about having the moderate Johnny Torrio control the underworld. Capone had begun a war against both the daylight and shadow faces of America at the same time.

Abruptly, Firo’s face appeared in Edward’s mind. That guy was about to become an executive at a young age, too. Was he a similar case? Was he the type who’d be able to force his way up through underworld society, like Capone?

No, I won’t let him do that. I’ll dump him in jail before that happens; count on it. I’ll wipe out the Martillo Family, too. Sure, he’s young, and that’s a fact… For that very reason, if we act now, we might still be able to straighten him out.

When that time comes, I intend to give my full cooperation.

“—Uh… By the way, getting back to the robbers…”

He was pulled back to reality. His current opponent wasn’t a big boss like Capone, or a little syndicate like the Martillos. It was a weird, well-bandaged couple.

Edward sighed. His mood was on a downhill slide.

⇔

“Whew. The pain’s finally subsided.”

As he rubbed his bruised arm, Isaac gave a sigh of relief.

“It has, hasn’t it.”

It wasn’t as if she was actually feeling Isaac’s pain, but Miria agreed with him.

The thieving duo, who’d been hit by a car, were walking along Broadway carrying their helmet and mask, which had been miraculously unharmed. Even when they noticed the pair, the passersby only thought they must be involved with a musical, and so didn’t pay them much attention.

“Still, the lousy tin can that pulled that hit-and-run—Next time I see it, things are going to get ugly!”

“Ugly!”

“I’ll hit it!”

“You’ll break your hand.”

Miria occasionally contributed a good comeback. However, Isaac was undeterred.

“Then…I’ll hit whoever’s driving it!”

“How are you going to drag him out?”

“Then…I’ll spit on the car!”

“Ooh, that’ll be perfect!”

Before long, the two of them entered a deserted alley where they began to discuss their next caper.

“All right… Our journey is approaching its climax.”

“It really is!”

“It’s been a long road, now that I think about it… Yes. First, we became thieves of time!”

“The time we stole clocks, right?”

“Then there was that big job… The one where we tried to steal an entire museum.”

“We eventually realized it couldn’t be done, though.”

“Yes, and so, in order to at least make it impossible for anyone else to get in… we stole the entrance!”

“Those doors were our heaviest prize yet!”

No one could stop these two now. It was nearly impossible to tell whether this crazy conversation was natural, or whether it was a type of trance to help them escape reality.

“Once, in a bid to become villains, we stole the source of children’s nourishment!”

“Yes, we took chocolate. I bet the kids in that town starved to death! Poor things!”

It felt more as if these guys were the “poor things.” Had chocolate been all they’d eaten when they were little? …One got the vague idea it might have been.

“We repented, deciding to do good things from that point on, and then…we did that one job.”

“That one, yes!”

“We stole a rich man’s legacy!”

“Now there won’t be a fight over the inheritance!”

“We preserved one family’s peace.”

“I bet they’re really happy right now.”

They didn’t seem to have the slightest idea that, thanks to that job, the

Bureau of Investigation had begun to move. That said, it was rather doubtful whether they knew an organization called the Bureau of Investigation even existed.

"And so! Since it felt so good to do something good, let's make our last job a good one as well!"

"What kind of job?"

"We'll steal the Mafia's black money!"

He said something that would have been no laughing matter even if he'd been joking, but fortunately, there was no one else around.

"That's amazing! Isaac, you're just like Momotarou!"

"Mo-Mo-Ta-Row?"

"It's a fairy tale from China or somewhere! A guy with a katana and his henchmen storm an ogres' hideout, fists swinging, and steal all the gold the ogres had collected!"

She had several things wrong, but Isaac didn't know the truth, and he accepted it at face value.

"I see, I see! An antihero, then!"

"Isaac, you're so cool!"

"Let's live with the thought of those dead children engraved on our hearts."

Apparently, to them, the simple theft of chocolate had turned into something rather macabre.

"How cool!"

While they were having this dim-bulb conversation, a group of four men came walking toward them.

Isaac and Miria moved over to the side of the alley, but the group was arrogant, and they didn't give way at all. As a result… One of the men's arms made contact with Miria, and she staggered, very slightly.

"Hey now, be careful!"

“Be careful!”

…And the spiral of destiny turned again.

Dallas Genoard was in a foul mood.

It all began last month, when his family’s estate in New Jersey had been burgled.

His grandfather had died, and an enormous inheritance had been just about to come his way.

His mother had already passed on, and he had only three family members left: an older brother, a younger sister, and his father.

He’d planned to kill his father, then pin the crime on his brother.

If it had worked, a majority of his father’s share of the inheritance would have fallen to him. He could then have given his little sister pretty much any excuse and taken the rest from her.

The plan had been flawless. He had no intention of carefully examining the content now, at this late date, but if he’d put it into action it probably would have been a perfect crime. …And yet.

On the night he’d gone home fully set on carrying out his plan, the house had been robbed.

Before he knew it, several of the servants had been tied up, and the entire contents of the safe—cash, title deeds, jewels, everything—had been spirited off. None of the guards had noticed a thing.

He thought it must have been the work of someone incredibly sharp. … Although he was a little concerned by the fact that, according to the servants’ testimony, the culprits had been “white Indians,” and by the fact that they’d left a note in the safe that said “We’ve taken the seeds of your unhappiness.”

In the end, no inheritance had come his way, and he’d ended up having to return without executing his plan.

It would take time to sell off the land, and since it was cheap property out in the country, it wouldn’t bring in much… So, if the criminals weren’t caught, should he take that risky gambit anyway, even if it was just for the sum value of

the land?

He'd come back to this ripe apple even as he mulled over such concerns, and for now, he was doing as he pleased. He and his cronies made a habit of mugging the unsuspecting and then pissing away the money.

Just when he'd been feeling irritated by that routine, that old man—and Firo—had appeared.

That lousy brat!

The boy had looked significantly younger than Dallas. As he remembered the kid's face, he gritted his teeth.

Like we're actually gonna let that punk make monkeys of us and get away with it!

But the guy had thrashed all four of them.

If we at least had more people… Or, no, if I had a gun…

Dallas hadn't had either, so he had headed somewhere that was bound to have both. He'd thought that if a punk from some other organization was acting like he owned the place, the actual owners would make a move. But he'd been very wrong.

As a result, they'd acquired a variety of new bruises and were back to skulking around the city.

Dammit. I'm gonna murder that punk and the Gandor chumps, too.

As he walked along, irritated, he lost the capacity to pay attention to his surroundings. …Not that he normally paid attention when he was walking, in any case.

His arm bumped into something.

He decided to ignore it and keep walking.

Someone yelled something at him from behind.

When he turned around, a couple in weird clothes were grousing at him.

Out of spite, Dallas decided to thrash the man and assault the woman.

He didn't feel the slightest shred of guilt.

Ennis had found the men she was after, but she wasn't sure whether she should strike.

If it had been just the four of them, there would have been no problem, but two people who weren't targets were there as well.

Not only that, but she thought she'd seen the pair somewhere before.

When she noticed the Japanese helmet the man was holding, she remembered everything.

It was the couple she'd hit while chauffeuring that morning.

And those two were traveling with the four men she was targeting…

"Sumbitch!"

One of the four men punched the male half of the couple. The tall man had no way to fight it: He took a fist in the stomach and fell to the ground with a thud. With that as an opener, three of the men began to kick him and kick him and kick him—

"Eeeeeek, Isaaaaac!"

The last of the four men had the woman in a full nelson.

Apparently they weren't friends with the other four. On the contrary: If nothing changed here, they might be killed.

Immediately, Ennis gauged her surroundings. No one seemed to be coming. Of course, if those four were reported and apprehended by the police, she'd have a problem on her hands.

That said, if she went out there, the man and woman would remember her face.

After a little hesitation, she stepped into the alley.

When she was close enough to touch him, the man who had the woman in a headlock noticed her.

"…What's up, doll? Those are some weird clo—"

He was cut off midsentence.

Drawing a clean arc in midair, a spin kick connected with the man's temple.

When Szilard had bestowed on her a variety of "knowledge," he'd given her combat-related expertise as well. On top of that, she didn't simply understand it with her brain. Her entire body knew it.

She'd managed to unleash that kick with perfect balance, just as if she'd practiced it thousands of times. If Szilard gave her the knowledge, she'd probably be able to ride horseback or dance perfectly on the first try, too.

"…What the hell?"

The three men stopped kicking and turned to look at her. The man who'd taken her assault was on the ground, unmoving. Released, the woman ran to her lover (?).

Without a word, Ennis approached Dallas and the others, then sank a punch in the nearest solar plexus. She bent forward slightly as she did so, launching a sharp attack on the man's center.

The fellow bent double, leaning over her. Smoothly, Ennis sidestepped the falling tough and charged at the next one with a speed that made it hard to believe she was a woman. Keeping her stance low, nearly sliding, she swept his feet out from under him.

Ennis had closed the distance between them in an instant, and the second man was completely at her mercy. At the shock that ran through his feet, his stance fell apart in spite of himself. His weight proved too much for his shaky balance to hold, and finally, he fell right on his can.

As he tried to get up, Ennis drove her shoe into his chin. His head went backward, and he just managed to stop it a little ways from the ground. Then her foot struck again. The added momentum smashed the back of his skull into the pavement with a dull thud.

Dallas only watched the spectacle, stunned. Memories of the thrashing they'd gotten that afternoon rose vividly in his mind.

In a mere dozen seconds, all three of his companions had been knocked out.

“…This time… This time, it’s a broad?!”

Today was not his lucky day. Even as that thought tore through his mind, he was sure he couldn’t win against the woman. His knife had been taken when he entered the Gandors’ hideout. …Not that he thought he could have won even if he’d had it, however.

“O… Okay! We’ll let those guys go. Just give us a break, all right?”

As far as he was concerned, he’d thrown away both shame and his reputation with that line, but the dame wouldn’t let him go.

“No, my business is with you.”

“Huh…? Uh… Gah…!”

The woman sank her fist into Dallas’s solar plexus. When she bent forward, it had seemed to Dallas as though she’d disappeared. Her attack had simply moved that fast, and it unerringly snatched his consciousness away.

“……”

Still silent, she looked around. All four men were out cold, and the man and woman pair were long…

“Wow! She took them out all by herself!”

“That’s amazing!”

…Not gone. They hadn’t run.

“Thanks, sister! We’re complete strangers, and you still saved us!”

“Thank you!”

The two hit her with rapid-fire thank-yous, and Ennis felt a little guilty. It was too late to mention that she’d saved them because she felt bad for having hit them with the car.

“You’re just like one of those, what’s the word… A hero!”

“Except she’s a lady.”

“Ah, right, of course… A heroine!”

It was a strange conversation, but they really did look happy. This bewildered

Ennis. Now that she thought about it, in all the time since Szilard had created her, no one had ever thanked her before.

"We owe you our lives, lady! Ask for anything!"

"We'll do anything!"

The offer actually troubled Ennis. At a time like this, was it all right to turn them down? If she did ask for something, how much was she allowed to ask for? This was "knowledge" Ennis didn't have.

Cautiously, after giving it a little thought, she made a request:

"Um…I'd like to carry these four to the car… Could you help me?"

They put one in the passenger seat, shoehorned the other three into the backseat, and closed the doors.

"Whew. That's that, then."

"Yes, that's that!"

"Um… Really, thank you very much."

"What are you talking about?! We haven't done anywhere near enough to repay you yet!"

"Ask for something else, anything else! Isaac's amazing, you know!"

After transporting the unconscious men, the three of them indulged in a brief rest. Ennis thought it was likely she'd "dispose" of the men after this. Meanwhile, the pair were planning to steal money from the Mafia. However, with neither party knowing these particulars about the other, they continued their conversation.

"That's right… It looked a lot like this one. The car that plowed into us."

"It did, didn't it?"

"That rotten car! Next time we meet, I'll scratch it with a coin!"

"What about the spit?"

"I'll spit on it, too!"

If she could make amends for the hit-and-run with something like that, Ennis

thought, she didn't mind if they did it all day, but of course she didn't say so.

"By the way, sister, what are you going to do with those four?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Huh…?" She certainly couldn't tell them the truth. On the spur of the moment, Ennis lied. "Um… I'm planning to turn them in to the police."

Drat! she thought, as soon as the words were out. The nearest police station was very close. These two were technically victims, and they might say they'd run behind her and follow her there.

"I see… Unfortunately, then, this is where we part."

"This is good-bye!"

"?"

"Just between us, see… The police are a no-go as far as we're concerned."

"A no-go."

Ennis studied the two of them. She really couldn't imagine that they were criminals. They were probably runaways.

"Um… Have you done something?"

"Let's see… What was the worst thing, do you think?"

"Umm… Probably killing all those children."

Ennis thought they were joking. Of course, the two of them had arbitrarily convinced themselves that children had starved simply because they'd stolen chocolate, so it really was more like a joke than anything. Once you knew that, you might even begin to think their very existence was a joke.

"So I suppose you could say we're on a journey of atonement."

Isaac parroted a line he'd read in a novel that had struck him as rather dashing. …That said, coming from someone who'd stolen chocolate "because he wanted to be a villain," it was an extremely eyebrow-raising statement.

"We did bad things, so now we're doing just as many good things!"

Meanwhile, Miria was terribly serious. In this case, the "good things" were

most likely stealing inheritances and plundering money from the Mafia, which meant, in the end, they weren't noticeably different from "bad things."

"Is… Is that right… You're both very strong, aren't you…"

"Huh? Oh, yes, I'm strong!"

"Strong!"

"Compared to you… I'm hopeless. I'm terrified of facing my sins…"

Why was she talking about something like this with people she'd just met? Oh… It was probably because…if she let this chance slip away, she'd never have another opportunity to tell anyone about it.

Ennis managed to convince herself of this, but even then, naturally, she didn't say what it was she had done. If she told them that, she'd end up involving them in her fate. If that happened, it would probably mean their deaths.

"What, you've done something, too, lady?"

"Then we're all bad guys together!"

Together. Oh, how nice it would be if that were true. …But it's too late. I've sinned too much. Ennis was downtrodden.

When Szilard had created her, he'd given her the bare minimum of knowledge and common sense, no more than what she'd need in order to take care of him: all the languages Szilard knew, knowledge related to combat, how to cook meals and drive cars, and similar things. That, and the names and faces of people she had to search for. These were the faces of the alchemists who had been Szilard's companions, and a young man named Maiza Avaro was at the top of the list.

He'd taught her nothing about ethics or religion. Even with regard to law, he'd only given her information concerning monetary transactions and driving the car.

Finally, there had been one important thing: the fact that Szilard could kill her easily. At the same time as the rest, he'd taught her to fear death.

Reading books was forbidden, and Ennis had never been allowed to listen to the radio (which had been invented after she was born).

Her turning point had come when she'd "eaten" a man who'd made an attempt on Szilard's life. As a last resort when fighting alchemists—in other words, people who had the same power of immortality as herself and Szilard—she had been given the knowledge of "eating." Of using her right hand to absorb everything her opponent had.

The first time she'd absorbed another person's knowledge, she'd learned all sorts of things. Knowledge she lacked had poured endlessly into her mind. It was as though her world had abruptly opened up.

She had thought about the contents of that new knowledge for a little while, and had come to understand both the sinfulness of what she'd done…and the horror of the man known as Szilard.

…But what could she do about it now? Just being aware of her sin wouldn't bring back the people she'd killed.

Besides… If he knew she was thinking these things, Szilard would probably dispose of her.

She'd learned, far too well, that that was the sort of man he was.

It wouldn't be possible for her to eat him first. Ennis knew that better than anyone. That man would be able to end her life before she could completely absorb him.

When he learned she'd eaten an alchemist, Szilard had asked her a question.

"I see… What do you think of having gained new knowledge?"

"Sir. They are all ideas I am unable to understand."

It had been the only answer she could give.

"…Hey, lady!"

"Lady!"

She came back to herself with a start. The man and woman were looking at her anxiously.

"…Oh…"

"Are you okay? You were spacing out."

“You were.”

“It’s nothing… I’m sorry. I’m all right.”

“Well, look, I don’t know what you did, but you just saved us, didn’t you? That makes it even. Let’s call it even.”

“That’s right. No matter what sort of bad things a bad guy does, you know what? If they do even one good thing, everyone thinks, ‘Maybe they’re actually a good guy.’ That’s how the world works! Even Capone… I hear he’s killed lots of people, and he makes liquor, and he even evades taxes, but since he also did good things, he’s popular. He’s got a house in Miami. He’s friends with Dempsey. He’s got a pretty wife, too!”

On the other hand, they say that if a saint does even one wrong, they’re treated with more contempt than a demon would be. If the world turned on the general public’s opinion, her statement just might have been correct… But that said, Capone would later do time in Alcatraz.

“So there, you see? You saved us, and that was a real good thing, so you’ll get to be popular, and live someplace warm, and be friends with boxers, and get together with a swell guy!”

“That’s right, you’re even, even steven. If it still doesn’t feel like enough to you, just do more good things! Then you’ll be even!”

What they said sounded insane, but in their own way, they were probably trying to cheer up their benefactor. Just knowing that made Ennis feel worse.

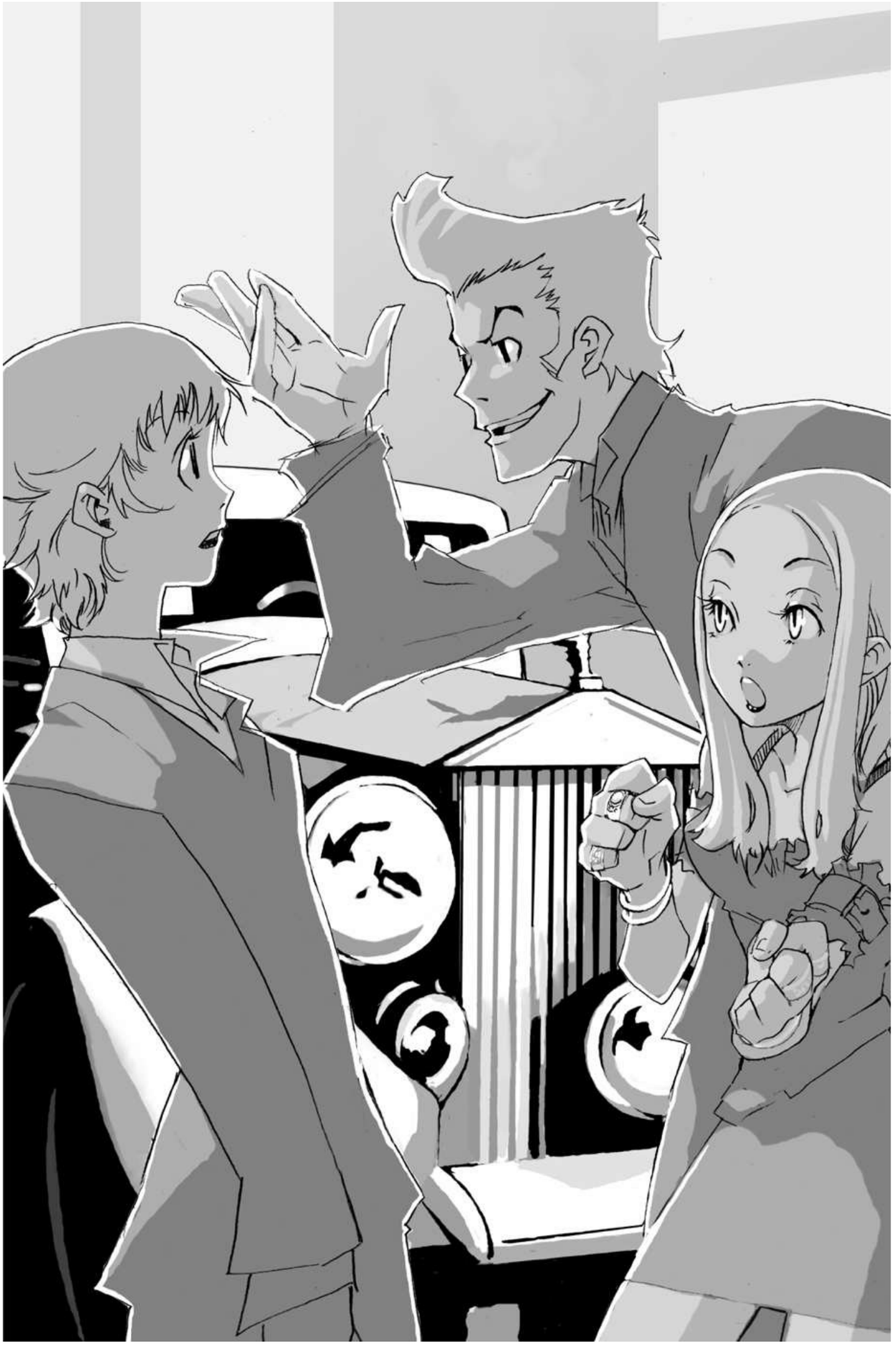
“Thank you… I’ll be going, then.”

Somehow managing to force a smile, she got into the driver’s seat.

“Oh, I see… Yeah, that’s right… Erm… Listen, I’m Isaac Dian.”

“Um, I’m Miria Harvent!”

For a moment, she didn’t understand what they were saying. When she realized they’d given her their names, she hastily etched the words into her brain: Isaac and Miria.



“I…I’m…Ennis. I don’t have a last name… Just Ennis.”

“I see, no last name, hmm? That’s different.”

“I’ve got it memorized: Ennis. Ennis. Ennis, right?”

They were both smiling like little kids. In response, Ennis gave a curt wave, then began to drive away.

In the mirror, she watched them get smaller and smaller.

They were yelling something. Ennis strained her ears.

“See you later!”

“Let’s meet again, okay?”

On hearing their voices, she had a thought:

She wanted to see them again, too. She probably wouldn’t be able to, but if it was possible, even if it was just one more time, she wanted to do it.

Their encounter had been brief, but those were two people she wanted to see as many times as she possibly could.

When she thought that, she truly…smiled, just a little. It was a natural smile, not at all forced.

It was the first time she’d ever smiled and meant it.

When she realized that, she cried. Just a little.

⇔

Twenty minutes later… The four young guys were lined up in the basement room where Szilard and the others were.

All four had their hands tied behind them, and their legs were handcuffed together as if they were about to run a three-legged race.

The four woke up, one after another, and began cussing at the old men who surrounded them. When Dallas, the last one, woke up, the other three stopped yelling for a minute.

“…What the hell is this? What’s going on?”

“Well, uh… See, it’s… Dallas, these guys won’t say anything.”

At that, Dallas looked around. Old men in expensive-looking suits sat near the back of the room, as if observing from a distance. The room was bleak, and except for the round table at the center of the group of old men, it held nothing particularly eye-catching.

“And hey, Dallas… While we were out, that lady shot us up with something.”

One of his guys spoke uneasily. The feel of the needle going in had woken him up, and he’d seen the other three get injected. At the word *injection*, a fierce anxiety welled up from the pit of Dallas’s stomach. Just what sort of weird stuff had they put into him?

“How are you feeling? …Ah, my apologies. There’s really no need to ask.”

As Dallas and the others broke out in a cold sweat over the strange situation, a voice suddenly spoke from behind them. When they twisted around to look back, they found an old man in a navy blue suit standing there. His mannerisms painted him as the most likely choice for the commander of their captors.

“From the way the other three act, I assume you’re the leader.”

“…Who’re you, geezer? What’re you gonna do with us?”

“Hmm? I’m Szilard. There’s something I want to ask you, and then I intend to kill you. Does that answer your question?”

Even as he spoke, he put out a hand toward the man next to Dallas.

“What the hell?! Kill us?! Yeah, go on and try it, you—”

The poor soul on whose head the hand had come to rest could see their captor over his shoulder; he began swearing at him…and then stopped moving.

“I will.”

Giving an unhurried answer, Szilard began to “eat.”

The only word for it was *nightmare*.

One of Dallas’s friends was disappearing, right before his eyes. Starting from his toes, as if his body were being folded up. First his shoes fell off. Then the handcuff that was connected to Dallas’s own ankle dropped with a *clink*. His brown trousers flattened, starting at the cuffs and traveling upward, like a

balloon losing air.

“Hey… James…”

This guy’s name was James, right? Wait…huh? Didn’t we even know each other’s names? Was that all we were?

The bizarre sight seemed to have disturbed Dallas’s memory center slightly.

“No, hold it… Hey! I said wait! *Hey!* James is *disappearing*!”

He tried to stop Szilard with his words, but his body was rooted to the spot.

Even before he’d finished speaking, their group of four had become a group of three. Dallas felt cold air seep into the space that had opened up next to him.

“…Hmph. I don’t call that ‘decent living’…”

Having finished his meal, Szilard was slowly savoring the “knowledge.”

“Oho… That liquor… You don’t know whether it’s safe or not.”

At those words, a stir ran through the men at the back of the room.

“In that case, why don’t I have you go make sure…Dallas Genoard.”

Dallas was dazed. Szilard bent down and whispered in his ear.

“Do you feel like striking a bargain?”

He didn’t understand.

“…Still in shock, I see. We’ll finish this later.” Shaking his head, Szilard stood, turning his back on Dallas. “And by the way, his name wasn’t James.”

With that, he and the other old men disappeared into the next room.

The three of them were left behind. One of them muttered, gazing vacantly into space: “Dallas… The guy who just disappeared was Scott. …James is…me.”

No one responded to the words. They only echoed, uselessly, among the three of them.

“Ennis… It seems there were others who saw you fighting.”

Szilard questioned her. According to the knowledge he’d absorbed from Scott, Ennis had appeared while the little gang was attacking a couple.

“Yes. I thought more people might gather if I simply stood by and watched.”

On the spur of the moment, Ennis lied.

“What happened to the couple?”

“They seem to have left immediately. I did check, and there were no signs that I was followed.”

“I see… That shouldn’t be a problem, then.”

“No, sir.”

Still expressionless, Szilard gave Ennis her next orders: “Well, then… The finished product is in the hideout of a Mafia group known as the Gandors. It would be unfortunate if we attempted to negotiate and ended up leaking our information to them. Threaten those three… Or, no, tell them we’ll give them a reward of some sort, and have them steal it back. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir. Only, their companion has just been killed… Do you think they’ll do it?”

“There’s no need to worry about that. According to the memories I just ‘ate,’ that lot values personal interest over friendship and the like. If we say we’ll spare their lives and give them money, I expect they’ll work with a particular will.”

Tapping his own temple lightly with a finger, Szilard grinned.

“In any case, once they learn their bodies have been made immortal—even if it is an inferior immortality—they’ll be so moved they’ll forget about their friend on the spot. In other words, that’s the sort of men they are. There will be no problems.”

“…No, sir.”

Giving a mechanical bow, Ennis hurried from the room.

The old men—who had been watching—shrieked.

“Master Szilard!”

“Th-then that injection really was…the incomplete product…”

“Why would you bestow it on those vulgar ruffians…?!”

“Quiet.”

“……”

One glance from Szilard, and silence fell as if by magic.

“Never fear. This may turn into a fight with the Mafia, that’s all. I’ve only made tools for us to use in the event that it does. Once this business is finished, I plan to ‘eat’ them immediately. …Or do you have the physical strength to win an all-out war with a gang? If so, I’ll just have you do it.”

The old men said nothing more.

NIGHT

NIGHT

The color of night had already come right down to the line between the sky and the ocean, and stars had begun to show through here and there. It was as though Manhattan's blue-crystal sky had shattered and darkness had come to the city in its place. But as if to drive away that darkness, colorful lights bloomed up from the ground, radiating from the main streets outward. Reflecting off the red bricks that colored the buildings, the lights summoned a crowd that was different from the town's daytime bustle.

New York's unprecedented Great Depression. Its spirit might have taken a hit, but the city wasn't dead yet.

As if they'd been waiting impatiently for night to arrive, New York's 32,000 speakeasies woke up and began to stir.

Manhattan swallowed up people's desires, and was on the verge of revealing another face.

Alveare ("the Beehive"), one of the handful of nightclubs run by the Martillo Family, was located between Little Italy and Chinatown. Outwardly, as its name suggested, it was a specialty shop that sold honey. However, if you went back behind the register and through a sturdy door fitted with a peephole, you'd find yourself in a speakeasy, where those who'd chosen to duck the eyes of the law gathered. Both men and women came here in search of liquor. Sometimes even children visited. It was a watering hole set up in the space between the law and the town.

In New York at the time, disguised speakeasies like this one stood cheek by jowl with one another. These loopholes in the law were found everywhere—one in the back of a tailor's shop, another in the basement of a drugstore, and even inside churches and funeral parlors.

Alveare was another sanctuary built inside one of these loopholes.

Even further underground, there was a spacious hall. Ordinarily, it was a

forbidden room that no one was allowed to approach, but today about a dozen men were gathered there. Even with that many people, silence and an atmosphere of tension enveloped the room.

The electric lights were off, and the only source of light was a single flame: that of a lamp, in the center of a round table.

“Firo Prochainezo.”

Quietly, the silence was broken. The enormous table took up half of the already crowded room, and men were stationed around its edge at equal intervals. Only the man who had spoken was seated; the rest stood.

The owner of the voice was Molsa Martillo, current head, or *caposocietà*, of the Martillo Family. He was a man of over fifty, who impressed with a dignity befitting his age and a fine physique that belied his years.

He was flanked on either side by two upper-level executives: Kanshichirou Yaguruma, a Japanese man who held the position of elder, or *primo voto*, and Ronny Schiatto, the secretary, or *chiamatore*. Maiza, the *contaiuolo*, stood next to Ronny, two places away from Molsa.

Although he hadn’t ended up in the role of elder because he was elderly, Yaguruma was well past sixty and, at a glance, gave the impression of being the proprietor of a Chinatown herbal medicine shop.

Meanwhile, Ronny was still young, with distinctive, almond-shaped eyes that gave him a fox-like air.

Although the roots of the Camorra were in Italy, Molsa wasn’t particular about nationality. As a result, their membership included an assortment of races.

Firo, who stood directly in front of Molsa, responded with a tense voice:

“…Yes, *capo masto*. I’m here.”

“…Can you answer the questions I am about to ask you without falsehood or deceit?”

“I can.”

After a silence of several seconds, the “dialogue” began.

“Do you wish to become a camorrista?”

“Yes.”

“The Camorra is an organization that was born inside a jail in Italy, our distant homeland. If you cross this line, prison may someday rob you of your freedom. The flame of your life might also be snuffed out in a fight that seems unfair. Do you understand these things?”

“I do.”

“Your right foot is in prison. Your left foot is in your coffin. Even then, do you wish to keep your eyes fixed on your own path, and to at times grasp honor with your right hand?”

“I do.”

“If necessary, can you use your left hand to take your own life for our sake?”

“…Yes.”

“Firo Prochainezo. If your father killed one of our comrades, could you kill your father and avenge your comrade?”

That question demanded a brief silence.

Firo didn’t know his father’s face. He’d been born and raised in a slum in Hell’s Kitchen, where Italian immigrants tended to gather. His father had been Italian, and his mother had been American with English ancestors. Apparently, when his father had been in Naples, Italy, he’d been a member of the Camorra. There had been a war between organizations over there, and when his had lost the fight, they’d come to America.

Just about the time Firo came into the world, Firo’s father had died of tuberculosis.

He’d grown up not knowing his father, and before he reached his tenth birthday, his mother had died as well.

Again, it had been tuberculosis. His mother had been kept isolated from everyone around her, and her death had seemed to be a very lonely one.

For a few years after that, he’d done anything and everything to stay alive. He

hadn't had the leeway to distinguish between good deeds and bad ones. He'd been drifting around New York when he'd tried to steal a wallet from Yaguruma, the syndicates's *primo voto*. The moment he'd tried to stick his hand into the elderly Asian's jacket, Firo's vision had somersaulted. He'd been thrown by Yaguruma hundreds of times since then, but that first time had been the most memorable.

That was when Firo had become involved with the Family. To him, the members who passed in and out of Alveare really were like family.

He'd never given much thought to where he belonged.

But Firo liked these guys.

That was all it was, but to him, it was enough.

"…Yes. If the one who was killed truly was our comrade, I would bury my blade in the heart of a relative."

"I see. …Listen, Firo. The path you are about to start down is…a spiral… Yes, something like a huge spiral staircase."

This wasn't a question. He spoke slowly, in the sort of tone he would have used to give advice to his own child.

"Our world is like a spiral staircase: Once you take that first step, you're in, and after that, the only way to go is down. Some go down cautiously, holding the railing, and others fall spectacularly down the center of the spiral. Some may descend through that hole elegantly, with a parachute, and be showered with praise, while others will have their parachute strings summarily cut. We're petty beings who continue to descend that staircase, nothing more. What waits for us at the very bottom is the end of our lives. Either we fall from the staircase to be dashed to the ground and die; or we descend normally, walking until we're exhausted and then die; or we die satisfied, as if we're going to sleep. The fact that you die at the end is the same in every world, but most people die on mountaintops, or…well, someplace close to heaven, although I don't know whether or not it exists. However, for us, there is no going up. Capone may look as if he's going up, but even he's only descending gracefully, in the midst of applause, just like one of the president's parades… Yet still, in the end, he's going down just the same."

At this point, he paused. Drawing a deep breath, he said:

“When a guy shines as bright as Capone…people outside the spiral staircase, people living normal lives, can see him. However, most are never noticed. The only thing people think is that there’s something buzzing around on a staircase that goes down into the bowels of the earth.”

Molsa’s eyes opened wide, and he gazed intently into Firo’s.

“Firo Prochainezo. I’ll ask you one more time. It’s not too late for you to turn back. Even if you’ve done wrong before, if it’s nothing too serious, you’ll be able to head for the ‘up’ staircase. You may be shut up in the big house for several years, but you can make a fresh start from there. However, if you cross this line, there’s no turning back. Until now, others have used you, but when you become a camorrista, you’ll be someone who uses others. You’ll turn some of the gears—only a few, mind—of the underworld. Once that happens, you can’t go back. If you try to turn back, the fellas who are descending the staircase with you will drag you down and throw you into the well at its center. Frankly, I think you could do just fine on the straight and narrow, too. You’ve got the ability for it. Firo Prochainezo. Do you intend to step onto this staircase, even so?”

Molsa’s speech ended there. Once again, silence descended upon the room.

The lamp’s flame flickered wildly.

How much courage must it have taken Firo to utter his next words… To respond to Molsa?

“…Yes. I’m prepared.”

As he finished speaking, sweat ran down his back like a waterfall, and salty drops fell from his clenched fists.

“…I see… In that case, show us your resolve.”

Firo took a step forward.

He drew his own knife…and stuck it into the tabletop. There were a dozen or so scars around it, probably left over from former rituals.

A handgun sat a short ways in front of the upright knife. Firo picked it up and aimed it at Molsa. Then he turned the muzzle toward his own heart.

When he'd finished this sequence of actions, Firo walked around the edge of the table, gun in hand. He passed half the men as he did so, and all of them kept intense eyes fixed on him.

When he reached Molsa's side, Firo knelt reverentially. Carefully, he changed his grip on the weapon, quietly holding it out to his leader.

The *caposocietà* took it wordlessly. Then he raised a hand and signaled Ronny, the secretary.

Ronny nodded silently, then crossed to a shelf in a corner of the room. He brought two bottles and a single glass over to Firo.

One bottle was filled with wine, and a liquid poison swirled in the other.

Molsa poured wine into the glass until it was half full, then filled it the rest of the way with poison.

Without a word, he held the poisoned glass out to Firo.

Firo took it without hesitation and slowly brought it to his lips.

When they touched the rim of the faintly shining glass—

—Molsa snatched the drink from Firo's hand and dashed it to the floor. Red liquid and glass shards splashed at their feet.

This process had demonstrated Firo's loyalty and courage. In leaving his knife, he'd shown a courage that didn't depend on weapons alone. In turning the gun from Molsa to himself, he'd shown a willingness to choose his own death over shooting his *caposocietà*. In bringing poison to his lips, he'd shown devotion, agreeing to accept even death if that was what his leader ordered. The content and significance of these Camorra promotion rituals differed from group to group. In the Martillo Family, after this sequence of actions, the final "ritual" was conducted.

"*Capo*… Please test my duty," Firo said.

Molsa nodded quietly, and then:

"Yaguruma, you stand witness. Maiza, you test Firo's duty."

He gave his two subordinates their orders.

Behind the round table, there was a relatively large, open space. When Firo and the two executives moved to it, Ronny brought over three knives. One was the knife Firo had stabbed into the round table a little while earlier, and it was handed to him just as it was.

The remaining two knives were gripped in the hands of the executives, one each.

The two of them, Firo and Maiza, were about to fight a duel, right there.

One of the differences between the Camorra and the Mafia was that, while the Mafia preferred guns, the Camorra used knife skills as a way to measure their honor. The more skilled with a knife someone was, the more respect his comrades had for him.

Conversely, for the Camorra, you could say that being able to use a knife was a duty.

As a result, a test of knife skills was incorporated as one of the rituals, and although it wasn't clear whether it meant the same thing among them, many other Camorra groups—both in Naples and in New York—included such a duel in their rituals.

The duel was said to be over when one of the combatants wounded his opponent's arm. If Firo lost to Maiza, he'd fight again, going up against one of the other executives. If he lost against three opponents in a row, he'd hone his skills with a knife, and the ritual duel would be conducted again at a later date. Of course, until that time, he couldn't be promoted to executive.

"…I trust there's no ill feeling between you two? If one of you stabs his opponent in the chest, I'll kill the one who did it then and there. Is that clear?"

Yaguruma spoke dispassionately. Although he'd emigrated from Japan, he'd lived in this country for over thirty years, so there was nothing odd about the way he spoke.

Firo and Maiza shrugged out of their jackets and hung them over the backs of nearby chairs. The two of them were in shirtsleeves, and in the dark room, the two patches of white stood out sharply.

"Not going to take your shirts off? …Well, I know it's cold, but not only will

they get cut, they'll get bloody. …You don't care? All right. In that case… Begin."

Yaguruma took a step back, and Maiza and Firo faced each other.

Firo wasn't sure how to start. Come to think of it, this was the first time he'd seen Maiza with a knife. People called him a coward behind his back, but since he was an exec, he had to have at least *some* skills with a knife, right?

Even so, Firo was sure he wouldn't lose. If his opponent had been Yaguruma, he would have been far less confident, but he was positive he could win against Maiza, no question.

That naïve thought was shattered in an instant.

Leaning forward slightly, the tall man in front of him began to advance. His steps were slow.

Abruptly, Maiza's arm stretched out. It really did look as if his arm had gotten longer.

"……!"

Firo jumped back immediately, only to have Maiza claim the spot where he'd been standing a moment before.

Fast…!

Directly after Maiza had stepped forward slowly, he'd then sped up drastically. That was what had given Firo the illusion that Maiza's body had stretched.

Maiza gave a slightly disappointed smile. Then he closed the distance again, unleashing a series of attacks with his knife.

The way it moved changed from attack to attack. Just when Firo had seen several arcing attacks in a row, in the next instant, a sharp, direct thrust would bear down on him. Firo also struck, undaunted, but every strike was deflected by beautifully spare motions. Then another attack would be launched in the opening he'd left.

He was *tough*. The way Maiza handled his blade showed his skills to be first-rate among the people Firo knew. If he'd been watching from the sidelines, he probably would have involuntarily marveled at it, but he didn't have the time right now to be impressed.

However, Firo also had the best knife skills of the associates, and he continued to evade Maiza's serial attacks by a hair.

Firo's strength lay in his sharp eyes and the breadth of their vision. The knife's pathway wasn't the only thing his eyes picked up on: He had a detailed grasp of the movement of Maiza's shoulders, his gaze, and his footwork, which he used to make split-second decisions about what his own moves should be.

The job he did for the syndicate involved being on the alert for cheating at a gambling den, and it would have trained his kinetic vision and broadened his visual field whether he wanted it to or not. In addition, when he had free days, he'd studied martial arts with Yaguruma and knife handling with Ronny and Molsa, so he was skilled at making snap decisions in combat.

Even so, Maiza was driving him to the wall.

Firo's eyes picked up the state of the room behind Maiza. Given the position of the walls beyond him, it was clear that Firo would be forced into a corner very soon. If his back hit the wall even once, Maiza would probably get him. In which case— Firo took a gamble. He voluntarily leaped backward, slamming his back into the wall. Maiza closed in. Firo swiftly went into a crouch…then kicked off the wall, charging at Maiza. For an instant, the other man looked confused—Or Firo thought he had, but he couldn't afford to double-check things like that. He took aim and thrust his knife at his opponent.

If he aimed for the arm, his own arm would likely have been sliced first. And so — Maiza's arm suddenly stopped.

The tip of Firo's blade jammed into the guard of Maiza's knife. The two weapons overlapped each other perfectly. But the blade of Firo's knife seemed to be just a bit longer: Maiza's blade hadn't reached Firo's guard.

A cross-counter with knives. The strange sight didn't even last a second.

Maiza hastily withdrew his knife, but as if synchronizing his movements to Maiza's, Firo shoved his own knife farther in.

The unexpected force threw Maiza off-balance.

This time, aiming for that instant, Firo yanked his knife back. Soundlessly, the blade slipped free of Maiza's guard. Then, as Maiza staggered, it slashed his left

arm.

The close combat, which had lasted several minutes, came to a truly abrupt end.

The sleeve of Maiza's shirt split, and red blood seeped from the tear.

"…That's the match, gentlemen."

Maiza beamed, holding his red-stained arm high.

After a moment's silence, the basement room erupted with cheers.

Up until then, the executives had observed the ritual with wooden expressions, but from the way they looked now, you would have thought their favorite ball player had hit a homer. Everyone was praising Firo, all at once.

"Yahoo! That was incredible, Firo!"

One of the executives put an arm around Firo's shoulders.

"I can't believe you managed to land one on Maiza!"

Apparently all the executives had known about Maiza's skills. Come to think of it, he'd never heard the executives say anything nasty about Maiza behind his back. Now that Firo had recovered enough composure to be able to calmly consider such nuance, sweat began trickling down his face.

"No…I was…startled, too."

"Congratulations, Firo."

All the strength seemed to have drained from Firo, and Maiza hugged him, as if to keep him on his feet. Then, as though they were following his lead, the other executives embraced Firo, one after another.

As he slapped Firo on the back, Yaguruma sent him a rare compliment.

"You sure have grown. I've served as witness for many years, and you're the first exec candidate who's ever beaten Maiza!"

Finally, Molsa hugged Firo, thumping him on the back.

"I won't say another word. You're a fine camorrista, Firo."

Then Molsa picked up the gun that had been used in the earlier ritual:

“I now fire a salute, to celebrate the birth of our new executive!”

Aiming at the ceiling, he pulled the trigger. The bullet punched through the wooden ceiling, heading upstairs. These shots were probably always fired at the same place: There were several old bullet scars in that area.

With that, the entire ritual was over, and a new camorrista had been born.

Possibly from happiness, the camorrista in question kept looking around at everything.

“…Huh?”

Then he noticed.

The red stain that had been on Maiza’s arm had vanished completely.

Just as he was wondering what that meant—

There was a heavy *thud*, as if something had fallen over on the other side of the ceiling. Then a woman’s scream rang out.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek! Isaac’s been *killed*!”

⇔

A little while earlier.

Isaac and Miria were walking along, looking just as they had before, when the streetlamps began to light up.

“Well. I wonder if Ennis got those four turned in to the police.”

“I hope she managed to make a clean getaway afterward!”

She’d called herself a criminal, so apparently they were worried she might have been caught by the police.

“Say, what do you suppose Ennis even did?”

“She probably ran away from home, don’t you think?!”

They had no way of knowing she’d thought *they* were runaways.

“Hmm… Yes, that could be it. Still… She was seriously tough!”

“Really tough!”

“I wonder if that was the rumored ‘Oriental Baritsu.’”

“What’s Baritsu?”

“Heh-heh-heh! It’s an Eastern martial art used by Holmes, the hero of those popular British novels. I hear it’s actually an abbreviation of ‘Barton-style jujitsu’!”

“Wow, Isaac, you know *everything*!”

“Heh-heh-heh, had you *observed* instead of merely *seen*, you would have known the meaning of *Baritsu*, my dear Miria.”

Apparently he was a fan of detective novels. That said, it’s doubtful that even observing would have clarified the meaning of *Baritsu*. For one thing, there hadn’t been anything to see.

“Still, tough girls are really swell, aren’t they…”

“Yes, like Tomoe Gozen!”

Why did these two have such an abundance of bizarre knowledge, and no other kind?

“By the way, Isaac! Where are we going next?”

“Right. About that…” Isaac dropped his voice to a whisper and began to explain. “Even if we’re stealing money from the Mafia, if we take it from a group that’s too big, we’ll have lots of guys chasing us, and that’ll be rough. For that reason, the plan is to target a small outfit that isn’t affiliated with anybody! According to the information I hunted up earlier, the groups that fit the bill in this area are the Martillo Family and the Gandor Family.”

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.”

“And so, for now, I thought we’d head to the Martillo Family’s hideout, since it’s closer. We’ll use today to just case the joint.”

“Case the joint! Okay!”

When they went to the address they’d gotten from the information broker, they found a shop with a sign in the shape of a beehive.

The brown sign had ALVEARE written on it in white paint, but Isaac didn’t know Italian, so he didn’t realize that the word meant “beehive.”

“Ah, this is it, this is the place.”

“Yes, this is it!”

When they opened the door, their noses were greeted by a strong, sweet smell.

Inside, the store was crowded with rows of honey of all kinds. They’d thought the sweet smell might have been leaking from the jars, but apparently the culprit was the honey simmering on a stove behind the register.

“C’mon in.”

The woman who was stirring the pot on the stove spoke to them.

“We’ll be closing soon, so if you’re looking for something, speak up quick.”

She seemed brusque, but Isaac and Miria didn’t particularly mind. They looked around the shop.

There was a hallway back behind the register with a sturdy-looking door at the end of it.

“Erm, we’d like to go through that door.”

“We want to go in!”

In response to this, the proprietress gave them a cold glare.

“…Haven’t seen you ’round here before.”

“Don’t worry about it!”

“Don’t!”

The proprietress took another good look at the pair. A tuxedo, no necktie, and a black dress. In their hands, they held something that appeared to be a helmet from some foreign country and a weird mask.

No matter how you looked at them, they didn’t seem to be police investigators, and she’d never heard of a woman participating in a sting operation before.

Arriving at that conclusion, the proprietress wordlessly started down the hall.

“C’mon, then.”

She knocked several times on the tightly closed door. For just a moment, light showed through the peephole.

There was a brief pause, and then they heard a heavy *click* from behind the door. Probably a padlock being released.

The door swung open, and brilliant light flooded out.

“Whoa…”

“*Amazing*…”

The interior looked like something out of a musical. The light of a chandelier illuminated the milk-white walls, turning them a gold reminiscent of honey. The room seemed more spacious than the building had from the outside, and it held nearly ten tables covered with white cloths. The exterior of the adjacent buildings had looked separate, but apparently several of them were connected on the inside.

There was a small platform at the back, probably so that local canaries could show off their voices. The concentration of lightbulbs was higher in that area.

“Ah, customers! Welcome, come in!”

From the back, a voice addressed them in slightly accented English.

A Chinese girl with pretty black hair came running up to Isaac and Miria. She was wearing an eye-catching cheongsam sewn from red fabric and embroidered with gold thread. The slim lines of her body showed up clearly, and her appearance was bound to attract male glances. However, occasional glimpses of something childlike showed in her gestures and the way she spoke, and it seemed more fitting to call her the darling of the establishment than its Madonna.

“Oh, I’m so sorry! I’m afraid we’ve been reserved by group today, so I’ll need to seat you two in corner. Okay?”

When she mentioned it and they looked around, the place really was quite empty. Aside from them, the only customers were a few old geezers and, for some reason, a child. Other than that, there was a group of about three men at the back, and that was all.

Without waiting for their response, the Chinese girl showed them to a small table in the corner.

Isaac and Miria followed her without complaint. Since they were only here to case the joint, they didn't particularly care where they were seated.

"Uh… For now, bring us your cheapest liquor, would you?"

"Would you!"

"Yes, yes! Just one moment, please."

After their exotic waitress had gone, the pair began chatting confidentially in whispers.

("All right, listen: We're looking for places where money might collect.")

("Like a safe?")

("Right. From what I heard, the syndicate's office is here somewhere. That means there's probably a safe here, too.") ("Okay!")

Silently, the two stood up and began casually prowling around the establishment. They couldn't have looked more suspicious if they'd tried, but at the moment, the only staff member was the Chinese girl, and she didn't seem to have noticed what they were doing.

"Now then, where to start looking… Nn?"

Isaac's ears had caught something that sounded like cheering voices.

"What's that…?"

He strained his ears, searching for the source of the noise, and found that there were barrels lined up in the corner of the room, by their table.

Isaac went over to the barrels and peeked through the gaps between them.

At first, it didn't look as if there was anything in the space, but the cheers were definitely coming from there.

"…Nn?"

His eyes fell to a patch of floor in the shadow of the barrels. There were several small holes drilled in it.

“What’s this?”

Isaac wrestled a barrel out of the way and stood there, looking down at the holes in the floor.

A faint light seeped through them. Apparently they opened into an underground room.

…And the cheers were definitely coming from those holes.

“Aha… The office is in the basement, then?”

In that case, where’s the entrance? As he began to look around, he heard the Chinese girl scream.

“Aaah! Sir! Not there! Very dangerous! Get away, hurry!”

At her voice, all the customers in the place turned to look at Isaac. Miria also hurried over with an inquisitive expression on her face.

“Huh…? What on earth is dangerous abou—?”

Bang.

He heard a dry sound from the basement. Then a light shock ran through the toe of his shoe.

“Wha…?”

When he looked, the tip of his shoe had been gouged slightly. His actual toes seemed unscathed, but wisps of smoke were rising from the brutal scar in his leather shoe.

Moving stiffly, Isaac looked up at the ceiling.

There was a small hole in it that looked brand-new.

“Huh…? Did I just get…shot?”

Isaac said nothing more. He collapsed with a *thud*, right on the spot.

Miria, who’d seen the whole thing from start to finish, screwed up her face and screamed.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek! Isaac’s been *killed*!”

⟺

“A toast! To the birth of a new camorrista!”

Molsa took the lead, and everyone in the place drained their glasses at once.

Having completed the ritual, the executives had gathered around their newest member and held a feast in his honor. Today, they were the only members present at Alveare. The associates and apprentices had been sent out to their jobs at other establishments, and it was just executives and extremely close interested parties… Or at any rate, that should have been the case.

“I tell you what, I really thought I was dead.”

“Thought so!”

It just so happened, two strange outsiders were present at the feast. The tuxedo and the dress didn’t seem that out of place on an occasion like this one. For some reason, they were seated at the same table as Firo, the guest of honor.

When the group had rushed upstairs, they’d found Isaac with his eyes rolled back in his head and Miria, who was sobbing “Murderrrr!” Then Maiza and Firo had exclaimed “Ah!” and the rest had assumed they knew the pair…and so it had gone. There was also the fact that, had things happened a bit differently, the bullet might have struck and killed one of them, so none of the executives had any objection to treating them to liquor.

“…Who’d have thought the couple from the hat shop would be here…?”

“Coincidences do seem to happen, don’t they.”

Firo and Maiza looked at each other, exchanging wry smiles. …Although, if they’d known about the other coincidences that surrounded them, they probably wouldn’t have been able to smile or anything even remotely like it.

“I’m terribly sorry about that, fella. I had no idea that barrel had been moved…”

Molsa bowed deeply.

“Huh? Oh, uh, no, no, it’s fine, don’t worry about it! It’s just the toe of my shoe. It’ll heal up fine if I lick it!”

“…No, it probably won’t.”

Possibly because he hadn't had someone older—much less someone with Molsa's dignity—apologize to him before, Isaac seemed a bit flustered. As for Miria, she'd eagerly begun to sample the dishes that had been brought out.

Seina, the proprietress, and Lia Lin-Shan, the waitress, had personally prepared almost all the food they carried out. Many of the offerings were surprisingly elaborate for a speakeasy, and the content varied widely and mixed all sorts of styles, from Italian pasta dishes to highly seasoned Chinese sautés made with lots of oil.

In addition to electric lights, a number of fuel-burning lamps hung on the walls of the establishment, and the pale flames made the food look even tastier.

One dish that particularly stood out was the duck placed in the center of each table. These had been fried whole in oil, then stewed in honey—the house specialty—and then fried again.

When Miria touched one with her knife, there was a light, exquisite *crackle*, and the juices flowed out from the break in the skin.

"Ooh, this is delicious!"

On hearing Miria's cry, Lia looked pleased. The two women smiled like children, and it naturally brightened the mood at the tables.

Just then, the executives Randy and Pezzo came up.

"Say, Firo. That liquor we just had… Is it gone already?"

"Yeah, we only bought a little."

"Huh. It was pretty stiff stuff. I like liquor like that."

"We were supposed to go around to different places and stock up, but there was a fire along the way. I went over to check it out, and we sort of ran out of time…"

Firo didn't mention that he'd been wandering around looking for a girl. It was true that he'd gone to rubberneck at the fire, so he hadn't lied, per se.

Abruptly, Randy's and Pezzo's expressions changed.

"? What is it, guys?"

“Uh…nah… Nothin’. Right, Pezzo?”

“D-don’t look at me!”

“?”

As the two of them stood there, tense smiles on their faces, Seina—who’d brought in some more food—smacked their heads with the flat of her hand.

“Honestly! What are you good-for-nothings jawing about?! If you want liquor that badly, drink ours! And you, Firo, you’re just as bad. Going all the way to some other place to buy liquor for your own party!”

Seina gave him a mild glare, and Firo ducked his head slightly.

“Well, uh… Miz Seina… All the liquor here has honey mixed in, you know? This sort of thing doesn’t happen every day, so I wanted to drink something a little more…adult.”

“Ha! You still look like a kid to *me*.”

With a dramatic shake of her head, she went to bring in more food.

All the liquor at this establishment, even the wine and beer, had honey in it, and it was terribly sweet. Although there were regular customers who came for its unique flavor and the two women’s home cooking, it couldn’t be denied that the speakeasy got fewer customers than other places.

There were two main reasons that, even then, Alveare was able to do business on this scale: the fact that it was run directly by the Martillos and didn’t need to pay protection money, and the fact that it didn’t pay off the police and Prohibition enforcers, or prosecutors and government bureaus.

Edward, who was in charge of the district, accepted no bribes whatsoever, and he didn’t cave to pressure from his superiors, either. In other words, slipping him cash would have been pointless. That said, they were good at spotting stings, and so far they’d managed to get by without any arrests.

At ordinary establishments, these expenses added up to five hundred dollars a month. One of the perks of being a speakeasy was the ability to make money while ducking the liquor tax, but in the end, the taxes they’d paid before Prohibition had been cheaper.

In that sense, the more than thirty thousand speakeasies in this city were trapped in a strange spiral of their own.

Because of the Great Depression, the amount spent on liquor had dropped drastically, and the spiral staircase was rocking wildly. In the midst of that situation, being excluded from the spiral made this place one of the lucky ones.

In this fortunate speakeasy, the jovial outlaws' revel continued.

"You're really something, though, Firo. To think you'd beat Maiza like that…"

"No, it was a fluke. Besides…if they'd let us strike at anything other than arms, I'd be dead."

"Mm-hmm, you certainly would! I'm going to keep right on putting you through the mill, so you'd better be ready for it!"

"Agh…"

"If it had been me… Let's see. First I would've taken his arm and thrown him over my shoulder…"

"Except that isn't a knife skill."

"…Nn? The pepper's gone…"

"By the way, you know that big ol' round table in the basement? How'd they get that down there?"

"Hey, somebody grab me the pepper."

"Hmm? Firo, didn't we buy four bottles of high-grade liquor?"

“…No, just two.”

“Ah, Miria, I want some of that duck, too.”

“Sure! Here, say ‘Aaaaah!’☆”

“…Whoa, that’s tasty. But it pales in comparison to your beauty, Miria.”

“Man, what’re you doing comparing looks to food?”

“Yaaay! Isaac complimented me!”

“Wow, do I want to slug these guys right now.”

“Heeeey. Pepper. Anybody.”

“Hmm. You could also catch him off guard and hit him with a flying knee kick.”

“Yes, only that isn’t a knife skill either.”

“I tell you what, this country’s much too cold to us Japanese and Chinese. The immigration laws, for one. Treating Asians as scoundrels so blatantly is just…”

“Yaguruma, you’re jumping topics all over the place… Are you drunk already?”

“Huh…? Don’t you have any pepper at your table either?”

“From what I hear, when they built this building, they put it in before they hung the ceiling.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“The table! What you just asked me about, Pezzo!”

“Oh, Randy. Randy.”

“What, Maiza?”

“Aren’t you going to do that trick today? You know… The one with the burning glove.”

Splutt.

“Waugh, Randy and Pezzo just spit across the table!”

“Nasty!”

“Suh, sorry, sorry. …We don’t really feel like doing that one today…”

“Hey, Ronny. Where’s the pepper?”

“Boss, come on, just make do without pepper.”

It was impossible to tell who was talking to whom anymore. It was a chaotic mealtime scene, and Firo was enjoying himself enormously.

Ever since he was born, he hadn’t smiled much. The people who’d lived around him in the slums hadn’t smiled much, either. …Or rather, they hadn’t had enough leeway to smile.

From the time he was a kid, he’d dreamed of smiling cheerfully like the Italians who showed up in movies and books. Right now, that dream had come true.

He made a wish: *Let this time last forever.*

He knew it was a dumb wish.

Still, he felt really lucky just to be able to make a dumb wish like that one.

⇔

One side of the spiral staircase was brightly lit.

Naturally, everything on the other side was shrouded in darkness.

Three men walked through the darkness in the spaces between the hustle and bustle of the city.

The jazz hall had its Closed sign hung out. Ordinarily, it would have been busy even at this hour, but since its three managers were all gone this evening, it had shut down for the night.

When they opened the door, there was a lone man inside.

“Oh, sorry. We’re closed toni—”

One of the three men swept a hand past the man’s neck.

“Nn…ah…——, ——, ——!”

For a brief moment, air leaked from the man’s throat. The next instant, red spurted out.

The man with the knife promptly used the door to shield himself from his victim’s geyser of blood.

When the flow began to subside, Dallas Genoard silently kicked the man over; he'd tried to cling to his killer. The crimson puddle that was forming around his upper body kept growing.

"…Downstairs. First, find out where they put that crate, got it? Then…pepper everything. Just make sure you don't hit the box."

There was a knife with a bloody blade in Dallas's hand.

The two men behind him held new-model machine guns inside their coats.

"Hey… Who're you?"

When they went downstairs, they found four members of the Gandor Family waiting there. They seemed to have been playing poker: All four were sitting at the table in the center.

Dallas answered, his face expressionless.

"Well… We forgot something here this afternoon, see. When we asked upstairs, he told us to go ask the guys inside…"

"Forgot something…? Oh, you mean that crate?"

The man glanced at a sturdy-looking safe. The crate was sitting on top of it.

"Yeah… That's it, that box."

"Sorry, fellas, but we dunno if it's really yours. Wait until tomorrow when Luck's back, wouldja?"

When he'd gotten that far, one of the other members muttered:

"Hey… Mike should know about that crate, too."

Mike was probably the man upstairs with the slit throat.

The corners of Dallas's lips curved nastily. He raised a hand, giving a signal.

The two behind him, who were smiling in the same way, produced the organ grinders from under their coats.

They were Thompson submachine guns, which gangs had affectionately dubbed "tommy guns."

A raid. It couldn't be… On a small outfit like this? That hesitation created a

second's delay.

"So long, nameless underlings."

"…You bastards! What did you do to Mike?!"

Before the Gandor men's hands could reach their hips, the tommy muzzles spat fire.

One after another, the Chicago typewriters punched several dozen holes into their bodies.

The massacre lasted only a few seconds. The roar that echoed through the basement room was more than enough to destroy three human bodies, the table, the radio, and the vases on the shelf.

"Ha, ha, ha… Ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-haaa…ha-ha… What, that's *it*? You go around calling people scum, and that's all you've got…? That's real nice. Nice and *hilarious*."

As Dallas laughed maniacally, a red hole opened up in his forehead.

"…Huh…?"

Those several dozen bullets hadn't quite been enough to kill the fourth man. He'd survived by using the other three as shields, and now, on his knees, the man struck back at his attackers with bullets. By the time he'd emptied his gun, one of the attackers had died instantly from a hole in his forehead, and he seemed to have nailed the other two in their guts: They were curled up, hugging their Thompsons.

The survivor picked up the gun of one of the comrades who'd served as his shield and emptied that one into them, too, without a pause. When he saw he'd blown away parts of the skulls of the remaining two as well, he drew a deep breath.

"What the hell was that…?"

The friends he'd been playing poker with just a few moments ago lay on the ground in front of him. One of them had had his fingers blown off. Even if he'd survived, he'd never have been able to play cards again.

"What the hell was *that*?! *Damn* it!"

As he screamed, he threw the gun he'd picked up at the corpses of the attackers.

After breathing deeply for a while, he stood, slowly. His knees were quaking, and he couldn't walk well.

"…The phone… For now…I've got to tell Luck…"

The telephone hung on the wall on the attackers' side of the room, so it hadn't taken damage from the machine guns.

"I'm pretty sure…Luck and the others are…uh…"

A hand had come down on his shoulder.

"……"

Terror enveloped him from head to toe.

"……Mike…?"

When he turned, fearfully, a knife was jammed into his forehead.

"…That hurt, fella."

Kicking the man who'd already fallen to the floor, Dallas spoke cheerfully.

"We really *are* immortal. That's awesome… I'm really moved… Yeah, really truly moved!"

The wound in his forehead had closed completely. Not a drop of blood remained to stain his clothes.

⇔

"Now, that's a problem…"

"Yep, a problem!"

"They were real nice people…"

"Yes, really nice!"

Isaac and Miria were wandering aimlessly through the nighttime streets. They'd partied until their bellies were full, then said their good-byes and left… But not only had everyone in the place been sad to see them go, they'd even said, "Go on, have yourselves a souvenir," and given them a jar of honey.

“I bet it would be a bad thing to take money from people that nice.”

“We’d be absolute fiends!”

And so, the pair had gone to scope out their other target, the Gandor Family, but…

“Ah, it must be that building.”

“Yes, that building!”

“It sure is quiet, though…”

As they watched from a distance, there was movement at the entrance.

Three men appeared from inside the building.

Hastily, Isaac and Miria hid themselves, then watched from the shadows.

The light from the streetlamps was unreliable, and they couldn’t make out the men’s faces. However, they could tell they were carrying a box of some sort as if it was important. They seemed to be standing around at the entrance and talking, and at this point they showed no sign of going anywhere.

“Aha… I bet I know what that is. It’s the syndicate’s black money.”

“Is it? Why are they taking it out? The group hasn’t sworn allegiance to anyone else, right?”

“It’s probably the other thing—bribes for the cops or something. What else would they carry out in the middle of the night, with three guys, real careful-like? It has to be money, doesn’t it?”

“I see. Isaac, you really are a genius!”

“Aren’t I? …In that case, there’s just one thing for us to do. We’ll take it now.”

“Why?”

“They’re transporting the cash today, you know. If we try to steal it tomorrow, the safe will be empty.”

“I get it! Isaac, you’re so smart!”

Quietly, the wheel of fortune began to roll down the spiral.

“Listen, if we take this back…you think they’ll actually give us money?”

“We’ve just got to believe ’em.”

“Yeah, but Dallas… You saw how easily they killed Scott. Once they get what they want from us, won’t they just ice us, too?”

“Forget about Scott. …Don’t worry. Those guys want this liquor. Right?”

“Yeah.”

“In that case, we’ll just hold a gun to it. We’ll tell ’em they won’t get it until after we get our money.”

“I see.”

They didn’t know that threat would fail to work on just one person: the all-important Szilard.

As the three men started off, a black shadow blocked their way. It was a tall man who wore a weird mask on his face. The strangest thing of all was that, on his head, he wore some kind of headgear with knife-like objects stuck to its front in a V.

“…Who’re you…?”

It was only natural that, even though he now had an indestructible body, Dallas looked taken aback at the sight.

“…For now, allow me to introduce myself as Professor Moriarty! Yes, I am Moriarty! …For unspecified reasons, I have returned alive from the depths of Reichenbach Falls.”

Apparently he really was a fan of the works of Conan Doyle. That said, Moriarty hadn’t spoken like that, and he certainly hadn’t worn anything as eccentric as that mask and helmet.

“Erm… As proof, this is honey I bought from Holmes, who kept bees.”

He took out the jar filled with yellow honey. It was the honey he’d been given as a souvenir a short while earlier.

“…Are you messing with us?”

“No-go? …Uh, all right, let’s say Jack the Ripper.”

“Cut the crap!”

“You sure are a tough crowd… Who would you prefer, then? Uncle Tom’s evil master? Or would you rather have the Wicked Witch from *The Wizard of Oz*? … Except I’m male, so…”

Both were popular musicals on Broadway. Since he knew so much about odd things like this, it was possible Isaac had been born into a fairly good family.

“Shaddup! We don’t have time to screw around with loonies!”

They drew their knives, intending to threaten the stranger with them. Right then, the attention of all three hatchet men was completely monopolized by the newcomer in front of them.

“What about with me, then?”

A voice spoke up from behind. Quickly, the men turned.

The instant they did, something was thrown at them.

“Waugh!”

When they hastily turned back the other way, Isaac hit them with the exact same thing.

“My eeeeeeyes…hah…ga-gah…gaaah…koff…”

They’d been showered with a powdered mixture of pepper and lime. It had only been a fist-sized amount, but that was enough to do considerable damage to the eyes and lungs of three people. Parenthetically, because the pair had “borrowed” it from the dinner tables earlier, the amount of pepper had increased by quite a bit.

The coughing fit that ensued caused them to have rather a lot of trouble breathing. Although they’d gained indestructible bodies, they hadn’t been liberated from pain.

Unable to stand it, they drew deep breaths in spite of themselves. As a result, they again inhaled the powder that still hung in the air. They’d fallen into a barren cycle.

Dallas’s group didn’t even have the wherewithal to draw their weapons. All they could do was cover their mouths and throats and roll around.

Advantage won, Isaac and Miria grabbed the wooden crate and absconded.

In the end, neither group ever realized that the other party was the one they'd met earlier in the day.

Ennis ran. She was bewildered.

Szilard had given her an order: "In the unlikely event that those three drink the liquor, kill them."

She'd been watching from a spot in the shadows about fifty yards away from the Gandor hideout, in the opposite direction from Isaac and Miria, but…

First their way had been barred by a tall shadow, and then, when a smaller shadow had circled around behind them, they were caught in a pincer attack. The next instant, Dallas and the others had abruptly seemed to be overcome by pain. The two shadows stole the crate from Dallas's group, then bolted for the main street without a second's pause.

"What's going on…?"

Should she chase after the two who'd stolen the crate, or should she help Dallas's group? Ennis hesitated for a moment, but, thinking that Dallas's group wouldn't die in any case, she decided to follow the crate.

She leaped over Dallas and the others, who were thrashing around on the ground, and made for the main street herself.

When she left the alley and looked around, although light still streamed from windows here and there, there were only a handful of people on the street. She didn't see any that were walking together as a couple.

Ennis looked this way and that two or three times, then broke into a run again, heading for the nearest alley. There was a bit too much distance between anything else and the street she'd just left. If the pair was abnormally fast, or if they'd ducked into a nearby shop, she'd be out of luck, but she felt fairly safe as far as the latter was concerned: She couldn't see any sign of a door having opened and closed.

Making a series of similar decisions, she ran from alley to alley.

Several minutes later, in the corner of a certain one, she found something

strange.

They'd been tossed on a garbage heap, but they looked new—and expensive—for unwanted articles.

From the shape they were in, it hadn't been that long since they'd been thrown away.

"A helmet and…a mask?"

A tuxedo jacket had been shrugged off and discarded beside them.

They were all far too familiar to Ennis. Come to think of it, the difference in the pair's heights had been familiar as well.

"It can't be…"

For a little while, Ennis was stunned by the conclusion she'd reached.

At that point, she temporarily broke off her pursuit.

⇔

"What in…? What the, what the, *what the hell is this*?!"

Berga raged at the destruction that spread out before him.

The Gandor brothers had gone straight home after their outing, and in the middle of the night, several policemen had shown up.

When they'd heard what had happened and come running, they'd found the corpses of the men who'd been their subordinates and comrades.

"……"

The oldest brother glowered silently at the horror.

"Who would…? Who did this…?"

The youngest brother's habitual smile had vanished completely.

Berga roared with enough force to scatter the smell of blood and set the building trembling.

"I'll *kill* 'em… Who goddamn cares who they are?! *I'm gonna rip 'em apart!*"

He'd declared an intent to murder in front of several police officers, but no one took him to task for it.

DAY TWO

DAY TWO

As the sun rose, the town, with all makeup removed, exposed its face to the light.

Again, the day began bright and clear. The sky, which was rimed with an even stronger chill, had gone beyond crystal and now resembled transparent ice.

“That’s a problem…”

“A problem!”

Once again, Isaac and Miria were at their wits’ end.

“Who’d have thought it would be liquor…”

“Yes, it’s liquor!”

That crate they’d stolen the previous night. As they’d wondered what Mafia treasure it held, and whether its weight was the consequence of being jam-packed with Benjamins, their expectations had grown, and yet the result had been…this.

“Why would they have three guys carrying just two bottles of liquor, in the dead of night?”

“Maybe they just wanted to drink it at home and were taking it back with them?”

“Let’s not be pessimistic. We sacrificed the helmet, the mask, and the tuxedo to get this prize.”

In the end, he’d even discarded the tuxedo. Miria hadn’t been able to take off her dress, of course, but she’d changed into new clothes a little while ago, and the black dress was tucked away in her bag.

The two of them were currently dressed as a priest and a nun. Either way, they were bound to stand out in the middle of town.

“…That’s right, it must be high-grade liquor! I bet it’s a legendary liquor, the

sort you can only get by defeating a dragon, the kind the gods drink!”

“That’s *amazing*!”

He wasn’t right, but he wasn’t far wrong.

“All right… What should we do with it?”

“Drink it?”

“Hmm…We could, but… Two bottles is a lot.”

“Sell it, then?”

“Do you think it would sell? We should probably get it looked at by a specialist first…”

Having gotten that far, Isaac seemed to hit on an idea.

“That’s it! Let’s give this to the Martillos, to thank them for that honey!”

“Oh, I see! Wow, I bet they’ll be thrilled! They said all they had there was honeyed liquor!”

“This is ‘a good thing’ for sure.”

“Yes! The dead children will be able to pass on!”

Making a variety of remarks of differing degrees of self-centeredness, the two turned their steps toward Alveare.

⇔

In the end, Ennis hadn’t returned to Szilard and the others. After thinking for a while, she’d decided to find those two and hear what they had to say, and she’d been looking for them ever since.

However, once you lost sight of someone in New York, finding them again was nearly impossible.

“If nothing changes soon, I’ll be… Master Szilard will…”

If she was much later in returning, Szilard might get suspicious and kill her. He’d be able to do it even if she was on the other side of the world.

When she gave up and started back home, she saw a priest and a nun in the distance.

Ah… Does God really exist? If he does, what would I need to do to get his help?

As she was thinking these things, she caught sight of the face of the priest up ahead.

His face was all too familiar.

If God really did exist and preside over all destinies…he was far too calculating…and cruel.

⇔

“Oh, good morning, Maiza.”

When it was just about noon, Firo stopped in at Alveare.

Even though they’d partied so much the night before, there wasn’t a trace of liquor or fatigue left on him.

“Good morning. You’ve made a new start today. What do you think?”

“It doesn’t feel real yet. …And actually, it technically starts tomorrow.”

He’d been given the day off today. They’d decided that, starting tomorrow, he’d be put in charge of a gambling den.

Firo had risen early and gone to introduce himself to the establishment’s employees. Then, with nothing in particular to do, he’d dropped in to have lunch here.

Just as he sat down to his meal…there was a noise at the entrance to the speakeasy—the door in the corridor that led to the honey shop.

At this time of day, all the liquor was hidden elsewhere, so there was no need to worry about a premises search. When Firo glanced at the opened door, he felt no tension whatsoever.

…But he hadn’t expected to see a priest and nun enter.

“Ah, there they are, that’s them. The good people.”

“It’s the good people!”

Words that didn’t match their appearances flew his way. Firo quickly recognized their countenances.

“Oh, uh… Isaac and…Miria?”

“Right on the money.”

“You’re right!”

“…I didn’t know you were a priest…”

“Huh? I’m not a priest. Why?”

“We’re not. Why?”

“……Huh?”

The pair looked truly perplexed, and Firo’s head began to ache a bit.

“Listen, we brought some liquor by today, as a sort of thank-you for yesterday. …Or, well, we’re not sure it’s liquor, but it’s definitely something good.”

“It’s a good thing!”

“What’s that supposed to me…uh?”

On seeing the crate they held out to him, Firo slowly stopped moving.

He’d seen that box before. When he saw its contents, he was sure of it.

It was the box that self-important old guy had had yesterday. And——

She’d been hesitant to call out to them on the street, so she’d followed them instead.

Then Isaac and Miria, in their clerical robes, went into a certain honey shop.

She watched it for a while, but they showed no sign of coming out.

“What should I do…?”

Having made up her mind, Ennis was on the point of going in. Just then, though, she noticed a group coming toward her from the back of the shop, and she hastily put some distance between herself and the front of the building.

As she watched from a distance, a group of four people—men and women—appeared from inside. Two of them were Isaac and Miria. And…

When she saw the faces of the other two, she thought her heart might stop.

She knew the faces of those men as well.

Or rather, she’d never actually seen them before. However, they had definitely

been in the “knowledge” Szilard had given her.

One was Szilard’s former comrade. The alchemist Maiza Avaro, the one whose knowledge Szilard wanted.

The other… She didn’t know his name, but it was the boy who’d been looking for her.

The four exchanged casual good-byes. Then Isaac and Miria headed into town, while Maiza and the boy went back into the shop.

Upon confirming that Maiza and the other guy had the crate, Ennis left immediately, hurrying back to Szilard.

“I don’t really understand, but… While Isaac and Miria are away…”

The guy who’d been with Maiza. Maybe he’d been looking for her because Maiza had known about her and had sent his friend to spy.

She didn’t know what connection they had to Isaac and Miria. It was possible that Maiza had tricked them and was using them.

Either way, she hoped the two of them would be able to get away after Szilard had “eaten” Maiza.

The thought that Isaac and Miria might have been in cahoots with the alchemist and made contact with Ennis in order to spy on her never crossed her mind. This was partly due to the fact that their encounter had been sheer coincidence…but the biggest reason was that Ennis liked that ditzy couple.

That was all it was.

⇔

“Explain yourself, Ennis. Where have you been? Where is the finished product?”

When she returned to the building south of Grand Central, Szilard was the only one there.

All the old men were individuals of a certain rank. They probably couldn’t leave their workplaces for days on end. Some of them had fussed, insisting they were going to wait for the finished product to arrive, but at a glare from Szilard, they’d gone home as if they were running away.

She didn't see Dallas's group, either. Well, they probably couldn't come back. But if they *had* returned, by now they were inside Szilard's right hand.

Briefly, Ennis explained what had happened. She kept Isaac and Miria out of it, phrasing her story as though Maiza had been the one to steal the liquor.

"…Maiza?!"

The effect was immediate. Everything but that man had vanished from Szilard's mind. It seemed likely that she'd get by without being cross-examined about Isaac and Miria.

"…Bring the car around, Ennis. I'll go myself. If I'm not the one to 'eat' Maiza, there'll be no point. Keh… Keh-ha-ha-ha-ha! I don't know if he knew about me and interfered on purpose, but it doesn't matter! I'll 'eat' him if it's the last thing I do! Make haste, Ennis! If anyone drinks that finished product, we'll have that many more to 'eat' our way through!"

"Of course, but, sir… If Maiza knows about us, won't he give that finished product to lots of his companions…?"

"No, there's no need to worry about that. In the first place, he hates immortality more than anyone! If he finds out about the finished product, he'll probably smash it then and there… Not that it would bother me in the least if he did!"

The alchemist Ennis had "eaten" long ago hadn't had that particular knowledge. All he'd known was that Szilard had gone around killing his comrades, and because Maiza had awakened suddenly, half of them survived.

"…Take a gun. This time, I give you permission to cut loose a bit. Kill all the citizens of New York if you like!"

It was an insane thing to say, but compared to the Szilard who always observed everything as if it bored him, this version was far livelier.

It frightened Ennis.

The wheel of fortune tumbled down the spiral staircase. The vibrations traveled up and down its length.

⇔

"What're we gonna do, Dallas?"

“Calm down! …For now, let’s think about blowing this town.”

Dallas and the others were in a juice joint they didn’t normally frequent. The finished product had been stolen, and it had been taken while they were recoiling from *pepper*, of all things. The instant they went back, they were bound to get “eaten.” Even if they fought, it was doubtful whether knives or guns would work against that Szilard guy.

“…Even if we leave town…let’s get that thing done first.”

“That thing?”

“What else would it be…? We’re gonna go off that Firo punk!”

⇔

The policemen had finally disappeared from the Gandor Family office.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! *Goddammit!*”

Berga, who’d been silent for a while, grabbed a nearby stool, raised it high, and smashed it against the floor.

With a dry sound of destruction, wood fragments flew across the area.

Catching one, Luck spoke.

“Calm down, Berga… Breaking chairs won’t accomplish anything.”

“Like I could calm down, you idiot?! What about you?! How can you be that calm?!”

“If we aren’t calm, we won’t be able to avenge Mike and the others. …Besides, I may be calm, but I *am* angry.”

He clenched his hand around the chair fragment. Blood dripped from between his fingers.

“Yes, this emotion is definitely anger. Getting angry calmly may be a contradiction, but there’s really no help for it. I’ve been trying to think of a way to quell this anger for a while now, but the answer I get never changes: revenge. I’m aware that this may be a foolish conclusion. Even so, in my mind, when I think about whether we should find the bastards who killed Mike and the others and turn them in to the cops, or whether we should get rid of them ourselves, right now I want to twist their heads off their necks with my own two hands, no

matter what. Hmm… In that sense, I may not actually be calm. Still, if I stop mulling things over like this, I'll probably grab a gun this instant and run all over the city hunting for the culprits, and I will most likely shoot and kill any police officers or civilians who get in my way. And so, right now, let me ask a favor: If it looks as though I may do that, Berga, stop me, even if you have to hit me or shoot me. So at least… This may not be a fair thought, but I want the two of you to stay calm."

During this long speech, Luck's expression didn't change in the slightest. He didn't even blink.

"…I see. Sorry about that, Luck. You're still way calmer than me, though."

Picking up on the dark flames burning inside his little brother, Berga calmed down.

"…"

Silently, Keith watched his younger brothers. What was he thinking? His perfect poker face made it impossible to tell.

"…In any case, the neighboring organizations are probably suspicious about the police shoving their way in here today. For the moment, let's go around and report what happened…while we exchange information and warnings, naturally."

Quietly, Luck spoke about what they'd do next. For now, they decided to start with the syndicate closest to them.

"Right… Let's head over to the Martillos first. If a small outfit like ours got attacked, they might be a target as well. On the other hand, they might know something…"

⇔

"Now, then… Sad as it may be, we must take our leave of this city."

"Yep, we're making a break for it!"

The thieving duo was walking toward the station, preparing to get out of town.

"Still, there are an awful lot of police officers around, aren't there?"

"Lots and lots!"

They couldn’t possibly be searching for them. Their disguises were perfect, and their faces hadn’t actually been seen.

They spotted a chap issuing orders to several police officers, so they waited until the officers had scattered, then spoke to him.

“Excuse me. Has something happened?”

The man he’d addressed, Assistant Inspector Edward Noah, nodded to the fellow dressed as a priest, then gave him a bare-bones outline of the situation.

“Good day, Father. Well… As you may already be aware, there was another gang dispute last night. Several of the Gandor men were killed.”

He told him only what would be printed in the papers. If the other man hadn’t been a priest, he might have simply ignored him.

“I am a sinful man, Father. I thought it would be best if people like them simply killed each other off. However, when actually confronted with corpses as miserable as those…I realized I felt a strong hatred for the culprits, just as I do when an ordinary citizen is killed. They were a foolish lot who steeped themselves in violence, but do at least pray for their peace after death.”

With that, Edward walked briskly away.

The couple he’d left behind looked at each other with evident despair.

Gandor men had been killed. That information alone seemed to reverberate, a lingering echo.

“…Wha… What are we going to do?! I didn’t think they’d actually *die*!”

“Oh… Oooooh… Maybe we used too much pepper…”

It was the ultimate misunderstanding. Not only did they think that Dallas and the others had been Gandor men, they thought they’d died because of the pepper.

“Aaaah… Now we won’t be able to look those dead children in the face…”

“Ennis, either…”

“I never dreamed it would get this serious…”

“Aaaah!”

Abruptly, Miria shouted.

“Wh-wh-what?!”

“What if—Isaac, what if—? If the police or people from the Gandors find out that Firo and the others have that box…”

“…!”

Then, instead of them, Firo and the others would be caught.

Conversely, that meant the odds of their escaping in the meantime would improve, but they weren’t that underhanded. …Or rather, it didn’t even occur to them to be so.

In any case, they’d already been in the wrong when they’d given stolen goods to somebody else as a present.

“This is awful!”

“We have to go back!”

The priest and the nun broke into a run.

They’d slipped free of the spiral of destiny once.

Although they didn’t realize it, it had swallowed them back up.

“Hey, those two…”

Since Edward had been roped in to work on an emergency incident, Donald and Bill were investigating on their own.

A man and a woman whose height difference matched the one in the report ran right past them.

“Uh… Oh, maybe… You think it could be *those* two?”

“What do we do?”

“Nn… Let’s leave them. We should head to Grand Central first. That’s our real mission… Once we secure the other party, we can talk to Edward, too.”

“…Right.”

“Ah… It’s like we’re lying to Edward, and I feel just terrible about it, but…”

The spiral was spinning faster and faster.

Its point was growing narrower, converging on a single result.

Destiny's spiral staircase. All sorts of wheels of fortune were beginning to roll down that staircase, whose central support was the liquor of immortality.

Those vibrations resonated, such that the spiral tower shook violently.

Almost as if they meant to break the very staircase of destiny.

⟺

"What's wrong, Firo? You've been acting strange for a while now…"

Behind Alveare's heavy door, Maiza and Firo were having a light lunch. Several other executives were there as well. Members who weren't executives tended to be hesitant about entering the place, so there were no associates to be seen.

"Uh… Well…"

"Is there something wrong with that crate and its liquor?" Maiza asked, sounding worried. They'd set the crate on the table, and he pointed at it with his fork as he spoke.

"No… I, uh… I was just thinking that coincidences tend to come in groups…"

"Coincidences?"

"One was running into Isaac and Miria again. Then, what they brought was—"

Just as Firo was about to answer, the door opened with a bang.

Everyone in the speakeasy turned to look in the direction of the noise.

An elderly gentleman was standing there. Nobody recognized the man's face.

Nobody except Maiza.

"…Szilard…"

"It's been a very long time, Maiza Avaro! A full two hundred years and more!"

"Listen, don't even look at the other guys. We'll just kill that punk and run. Well, we've got these Thompsons, and I guess if we just ice everybody on our way out, there'll be nobody to bother us about it later… Ha-ha…"

As they walked toward Alveare, Dallas and the others checked the ammunition

for their tommy guns. Counting the drum magazines, they had about a hundred shots left.

“By the way, Dallas. The Martillo Family, the one that punk’s in. Is that really their hideout?”

“Yeah… I heard it from an information dealer, after I paid him. …If the brat’s not there, we’ll just rub out the Martillo Family or whatever they’re called. We’ll leave the punk a message in blood: ‘You’re next’…”

“Ha-ha! What’re you, Jack the Ripper?”

“It fits, using a corny old gimmick on a corny punk. Ha-ha…”

The three walked down a gloomy backstreet hemmed in by old brick. The main streets were crawling with cops, so they’d decided to avoid them, but if it came down to it, they were prepared to kill coppers and even unrelated passersby. Or rather, they weren’t prepared so much as defiant.

Taking advantage of the fact that the street was deserted, they were openly checking their machine guns as they walked.

“All right… This is our last job in this apple. If we don’t make it a good one, we may end up out of work and have to take up begging, y’know.”

“Ha-ha-ha… Hey, speaking of beggars, that one a little while back was hilarious…”

“Yeah, the guy with the flowers in that paper bag? He’d saved up quite a bit.”

“And you, Dallas, you kicked him all to heck. What’d you say, something like, ‘Mugging pays better’n begging these days’…?”

“Watch that the guy’s actually a mugger now… Ha-ha… Ha-ha! Ha! Ha! Ha-ha…”

The spiral of destiny converged. As if it were not coincidence, but inevitable.

⇔

“…Mu-mugging… W-was that…? Were they talking about us?”

“I don’t think so… I mean, I just heard them over the fence.”

Isaac and Miria were wandering around a factory lot. They’d been at a loss as

to what excuse to give, and then they'd managed to lose their way as well.

"B-but, you know… It could be the cops…"

"I'll check."

Nimbly climbing onto an oil drum that sat beside the fence, Miria peeked at the scene on the other side.

"…!"

No sooner had she hastily clambered down than she leaped at Isaac and clung to him, shivering hard.

"Wh-wh-wha, what's wrong?"

"It's *them*! *Them!* The ones who hit you yesterday… The ones Ennis beat up and took to the police! There's one missing, but it's them for sure!"

She didn't seem to have realized it was the group they'd attacked the previous night.

"…Really?"

"Uh-huh!"

After a little thought, Isaac reached a conclusion.

"I see… Is that what it was!"

"Wh-what?"

"They must have broken out of jail!"

"Eeeeek, vicious criminals!"

"I bet…they're planning to get revenge on Ennis."

"This is awful! Ennis is going to die!"

As she shrieked, her face was dead white.

"It's all right. Ennis is tough, remember? She can take those guys as often as _"

"No, no, no she can't!"

"?"

“Because, I mean, they… They had machine guns!”

At those words, even Isaac went pale.

“…You’re kidding…”

Ennis could die. Their hero—or, no, their heroine—was on the verge of being killed. …But what could they do?

Isaac looked down for a while. Then he murmured, as if talking to himself:

“You know… By rights, I should have gotten killed by those thugs yesterday.”

“Huh?”

“But Ennis saved me, you know. That’s why, to me, Ennis is a hero.”

“To me, too…!”

“And heroes… They don’t die. They mustn’t die.”

“…”

Isaac seemed to be brooding over something. At the sight of his face, Miria gulped quietly.

“…Holmes, shot and killed when thugs he’d captured broke out of jail… Conan Doyle didn’t write a story like that. He hasn’t written one like that.”

“…Isaac…?”

“I think it’s probably…because that would be boring. Because readers who like Holmes would be sad. If he’s going to get killed, it has to be by a lifelong nemesis like Moriarty or it’s no good… Those guys aren’t big enough for that. Am I right, Miria?”

“…Uh-huh.”

It was absurd logic, but he was probably desperate, in his own way. Desperate to find the words to psych himself up.

“She’s our hero… No, our heroine…and I think we have to return the favor she did us. Listen, Miria… Maybe we can’t become good people anymore, no matter how hard we try, but…at least Ennis…”

“We absolutely positively have to save her!”

Without even listening to the end of what he was saying, Miria grabbed Isaac's arm and began to run, chasing after Dallas and the others.

"He… H-h-h-h-hey, wait, I'm the only one who's g-g-g-going… L-l-l-listen, we'll be up against machine guns, and you might die too-too-too… Fnghah!"

He'd been talking as he was pulled along at a run, and he'd bitten his tongue.

Putting a hand to his mouth, Isaac thought:

Oh, I'm so glad I'm with Miria.

He smiled as if he found it funny.

A priest and a nun tore through a town of redbrick.

They had no crucifixes.

They didn't know the words to any prayers.

Even so, they were trying to save someone.

⟺

As he gazed at the old man, Maiza was trembling. Watching the two of them quizzically, Firo spoke to his senior executive.

"…Uh… What's with the loony old fool? Do you know him?"

Firo had been eyeing the coot suspiciously, but then he noticed a familiar form on the ground behind the codger, in the hallway that led to the honey shop.

"…Miz Seina? …Wha…? Miz Seina!"

Involuntarily, Firo stood up. Seeing his expression, the other executives also stood, one after another. In a moment, a tense atmosphere had descended over the speakeasy.

The old man laughed merrily, as if the mood didn't bother him at all.

"…Haaaa-ha! Don't worry, Maiza. Or you, nameless sacrifices… I only hit the woman a little and knocked her down. That said, I struck her a bit too hard, so one or two of the bones in her neck might be broken…"

"…Bastard! I'll rip you to pieces!"

Randy, who'd been in the corner, angrily pounded the table with his fist. After

a moment, Pezzo's fat hand also struck it. The reaction jolted the plates off, and they shattered on the floor.

"My, my… There are seven bones in the neck, you know. Such a fuss over one or two…"

He gave a mocking laugh. It wasn't only Randy now: The other executives, Firo included, were enraged as well. They started toward the old man, reaching into their jackets as they went.

"Wait! Please!"

They were checked by Maiza's shout.

Unusually for him, cold sweat had broken out on his face.

"Men… He's only after me. I'll deal with him, so while I do, please escape through the back door."

"Maiza…?"

"Hey… What're you talking about, Maiza?!"

After a little hesitation, their leader gave a straightforward, bare-bones explanation of his connection to Szilard: "He is the man who once…killed… thirteen of my…my companions, and…my younger brother."

At his words, in an instant, silence fell over the room. That silence was broken by Szilard himself.

"I've 'eaten' five since then, so it's technically eighteen. Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"…Szilard…"

Only Firo, who was right next to him, saw it. Maiza's face wore an expression he'd never seen before, not once in the five years since he'd met him.

Although he didn't really understand why, the moment he saw the hot fury that blazed in those eyes, anger began boiling over inside Firo, too.

"Maiza… I don't get any of this, but… In other words, this guy's your enemy, right?"

"…That makes him our enemy, too, yeah?"

Picking up the thread of the conversation, Randy simultaneously launched the battle.

Even as he finished speaking, he shot Szilard with the handgun he'd pulled out of his jacket.

There was a loud *bang*, and a red hole opened in the right side of Szilard's chest.

Immediately afterward, the hole was joined by another.

"And actually, he was enough of an enemy the second he laid a finger on Seina. Right, Randy?"

As he spoke, Pezzo also held a gun wreathed in smoke.

"In any case, it would be a waste to get our knives rusty on this old gink."

"Make sure you don't hit Seina."

Seeing that the old man hadn't gone down yet, the other executives drew their pieces, one after another.

Maybe they didn't care that it could mean jail time, or maybe they'd given themselves over to rage: They didn't show the slightest hesitation.

Dry explosions echoed through the room.

"It's no good… Guns won't work on him."

Maiza's murmur was drowned out by the thunderous roar.

The rain of bullets didn't stop until they'd all exhausted their supply.

The bullets that had passed through Szilard's body or missed it entirely had turned the magnificent, richly ornamented interior into something that looked like the walls of a Bronx public toilet.

"…Hey…Maiza…"

As he asked the question, Randy shook his head.

"What gives…? That old guy's still on his feet…"

Szilard's upper body was riddled with holes. However, once again, his mouth had twisted hugely.

Seeing this, Maiza yelled his answer:

“I’ll explain later; just run! Please!”

He was too late.

Szilard reached down toward his feet. A black case sat there. It was an expensive-looking case, about the right size for a tenor saxophone.

“I tell you, learning not to feel pain was a lot of work. There’s no point in being indestructible if I lose consciousness, after all.”

Beaming, he crouched down and opened the case with a light *click*.

Very few of the people in the speakeasy had managed to predict what was inside it.

Even after Maiza’s warning, not one of them made a move to run.

“If my spine or head are damaged, I stop being able to move for a little while, but… Well, on the whole, you aimed for my heart. I’m grateful for that. … Although, even if you had aimed for my head, I would have been able to dodge.”

Firo, who’d been the first to realize what was in the case, launched himself forward with all his might.

He closed the distance in one sprint and tried to kick the black case Szilard was opening away from him. Since Szilard was bending over, he was also planning to send a good kick into his face.

“You’re very young.”

Szilard’s arm stopped his leg.

“Yes… Young. That’s more aggravating than anything.”

Firo had been thrown off balance, and Szilard drove a kick into his stomach.

“Gah…!”

He was knocked backward, ending up right where he’d started…back beside Maiza.

“Firo… As *contaiuolo*, I’m ordering you…”

As Maiza steadied Firo, who’d come close to falling over, he gave him an order.

“You go out the back door, right now, and run… No, go tell the boss and the secretary what’s happening.”

Thinking that he wasn’t the type of person who’d run away just because someone told him to, Maiza had made up an order on the spot.

“B-but, Maiza, you—”

“I’ll be fine. I don’t intend to die yet.”

Not until I’ve killed Szilard. Maiza didn’t say the words all the way to the end, but…

“……Understood!”

Firo had been momentarily bewildered, but when he saw the gaze Maiza fixed on him, just for an instant, he immediately broke into a run. For that one moment, the hatred had vanished from Maiza’s eyes, and they’d been smiling quietly.

They were the eyes of someone who’d made an unshakeable resolution. *If a guy in our organization has eyes like that, it doesn’t matter whether his intent is right or off the mark: There’s absolutely nothing to do about it. Either listen obediently to what he has to say, or stop him if you have to kill him. It’s a straight choice between two alternatives.*

And Firo believed in Maiza’s will. He’d launched himself off the wooden floor, into a run.

“Do you think I’ll let him go? Well, I could… But, Maiza, I want to cause you as much pain as possible before I ‘eat’ you. Both physically…and emotionally.”

Smiling happily, Szilard picked up the contents of the black case.

“…Hey… Is that for real…?”

It was one of the executives who’d spoken.

Firo was running for the back door. Trained on his back…was the muzzle of the military-grade submachine gun Szilard held. With absolutely no hesitation, he pulled the trigger.

When the ferocious roar exploded behind him, Firo nearly fell in spite of

himself. However, there was no impact. Without looking back, Firo disappeared down the corridor that led to the speakeasy's back door.

"…As usual, you make no sense. Is that brat really so important to you?"

Szilard looked mystified. Maiza stood in front of him, blocking his way. The machine gun had opened pitiful holes in his body, and red liquid gushed from them like a fountain.

"…So, none of the bullets that went through you hit the boy… Hmm. Was it the quality of the powder…? Or maybe that's the best this gun can do?"

Without seeming particularly interested in Maiza's condition, Szilard began to look appraisingly at the machine gun, which was still faintly wreathed in smoke.

"Maiza!"

"I'm…fine… Hurry and…run…plea…"

"Maiza, you moron! You think we could run when one of our guys just got shot?! I'm gonna smack you one after we get him, so don't you go dying yet!"

As he spoke, Randy grabbed the leg of a stool and hurled it at Szilard.

"Whoops… Hmm?"

He evaded the first stool by simply moving his upper half, but Pezzo had thrown a second one right on the heels of the first. At the same time, the other executives threw stools in rapid succession.

Concluding that he couldn't dodge them all, with no other choice, he stopped them with his hand. A strong vibration coursed through Szilard's arm.

Taking advantage of that moment of vulnerability, Randy, Pezzo, and several other executives closed in.

They were too spread out for him to shoot them all at once, and he didn't have time to take them out one after another.

"Pin him down!"

Drawing his knife, Randy leaped at Szilard. Szilard's only response was to retreat slightly.

The executives who'd closed in on him from the front didn't notice, but from

Randy's perspective, Szilard had disappeared into a dead angle: He'd backed up into the narrow hallway.

"You've done well, nameless sacrifices."

"Oh, hell…"

Unable to kill their momentum, the men had fallen into a straight line.

Then a ferocious, spear-like barrage of bullets ran them through.

After the space of a breath, Pezzo—whose shirt was now dyed red—and several other executives fell near the entrance. To make sure they were dead, Szilard raked the floor with the trench-sweeper gun. He then turned the muzzle on the others who'd stayed in the room. There was a brief roar as the speakeasy that had symbolized the splendor of the Prohibition era had become something that looked like a post–Civil War ruin.

"Don't screw with me… Bastard…"

Randy, who'd quickly hidden against the wall, had been spared by the bullets' weak penetration through the barrier. Since Szilard had backed into the hallway, he was currently in his blind spot.

"…Hey…Pezzo… Dammit…!"

The sight of his buddy's big body lying at the mouth of the hall nearly sent him into a rage, but he desperately calmed himself down, only to close in on the hall, crouching low. His knife was in hand, and he was prepared to take Szilard's head off the moment he showed his face. He knew he wouldn't actually be able to do that, but if he could at least drive it into his brain…

Suddenly, a shape darted out of the hall.

"_____!"

Randy raised his knife…and froze.

The figure that had leaped out…or rather, had been thrown out by Szilard… was Seina's unconscious body. Its head drooped limply.

In the instant he stood, frozen, the muzzle of a gun appeared from behind the falling Seina's.

Randy, who'd been about to scream something, danced the dance of death in a spray of blood, in time to the gunfire.

This happened just as Maiza finished regenerating. A humorless comedy.

⇔

When he opened the rear door, Firo was struck by an odd sense of *wrongness*.

Even before he'd located the source of the feeling, he hastily leaped backward.

The next moment— Something swept past him, right in front of his nose, like the blade of a guillotine.

It took him several seconds to realize that it had been the heel of a leg, raised high. Up until then, his attention was focused on the leg's owner.

"You're…"

Firo knew that face. Or rather, those clothes.

"From yesterday…"

"You're the…"

Realizing she recognized her opponent's face, Ennis halted her attack.

It was the guy from the knowledge she'd gotten from Barnes, via Szilard. The guy who'd been going around looking for her. That was all she knew about him, but in spite of herself, she paused.

Szilard had told her to detain Maiza if he fled out the back door, so she'd launched a surprise attack the moment the door opened… But apparently the shadow of her leg falling across his face had given her away. Not only that, but to *this* man, of all people.

After giving it a little thought, Ennis decided to reopen her attack. This guy was probably Szilard's enemy as well. If she let him go, she might lose her own life.

However, on the other hand, Isaac's and Miria's faces flickered through her mind. *If Szilard ordered me to kill them, what on earth would I do?*

"Waugh, hold it!"

After a few seconds' pause, the woman in front of him launched another kick.

He managed to evade the first attack, but the second kick, propelled by a spin

with the opposite leg, sank neatly into the top of Firo's shoulder.

The impact was greater than he'd expected, and it sent him staggering into the wall behind him. Along with a light shock, he felt the cold of the bricks upon his back.

"Ghk… Careless…"

Without pausing, Ennis sent a fist his way.

Huh. That looks like the Oriental martial arts I'm learning from Yaguruma. At that conclusion, Firo naturally slipped into the motions he'd practiced with his *primo voto*.

"I…"

Using his own right hand, he grabbed the right wrist Ennis had thrust out. It was moving pretty fast, but compared to Yaguruma's jabs, he'd been able to follow it with his eyes…and since her wrist was thinner than a man's, he was able to stop it fairly easily.

Ennis's eyes widened slightly.

"…said…"

Then he raised his left hand high, turning his back to Ennis as he pulled her closer. Firo's body slipped past Ennis's side, almost as if they were dancing…and for a moment, the two of them were parallel to each other.

"…*wait*, all right?"

Twisting his opponent's wrist, he swept her feet out from under her. As her body tilted, he pulled her down in one move. The result was that Firo dropped into a crouch…and Ennis's back lightly struck the ground.

Not only that, but Firo was still holding her right wrist. From this point on, no matter what move she tried to make, she'd lose the initiative to the boy in front of her. Without more "knowledge" than her mind currently held, there was nothing Ennis could do. This boy seemed to have combat training she didn't possess.

Firo asked the woman a question. His expression was quiet.

“…Explain this, would you? You got anything to do with that old guy in there? Why is he here, and why doesn’t getting shot kill him? And most importantly… Who are you?”

On hearing this, Ennis was a bit startled. This guy didn’t know anything about her. Not only that, he didn’t even know about Maiza and Szilard… In which case, why had he been looking for her?

“Listen. Please… I don’t know a thing, and I’m the only one. If things stay that way, I’ll look like an idiot.”

Doesn’t know a thing… That was exactly the way she’d been, once. The world as it had been before she’d “eaten” the alchemist rose again inside Ennis. Herself, given only the bare minimum of knowledge. The memories of that time made her feel nauseated, even though it was herself she was remembering. After she’d learned everything, she’d felt, and continued to feel, the pain of not knowing.

“……You won’t regret it?”

“…Huh?”

“Once you know…you may not be able to go back. Do you still want to know… even so?”

For the space of a few breaths, there was silence. After thinking briefly, Firo spoke.

“You know… They said something similar to me at the ritual last night.”

“…Pardon?”

“Tell me. I might regret it, but I’m good at forgetting stuff. …I’m no genius.”

With that, he let go of Ennis’s right arm and stood.

For a moment, Ennis looked blank. Then she followed suit, a mystified expression on her face.

“…You don’t think I’ll run away?”

Her eyes were fixed steadily on Firo’s.

After another short pause, Firo answered. If the situation hadn’t been what it

was… If the two of them had met normally, he might have blushed a bit.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just dumb, that’s all.”

“You really are a dull-witted man, Maiza.”

Szilard gave Maiza a pitying look.

The smell of blood filled the speakeasy. The only ones standing were Szilard and Maiza.

“I’m not as dumb as you are.”

At this point, both Maiza’s polite tone and the smile that put people at ease were gone.

“Back then… When you managed to summon the demon on the ship, I should have stolen the privilege from you, even if I had to kill you to do it.”

In contrast, Szilard preserved a persistent calm. Though facing another immortal, he didn’t seem to doubt his absolute advantage.

Even as the terrible scene around him inspired white-hot rage, Maiza squashed it down and spoke, casting about for a way to break out of the situation as he did so.

“That demon… If I’d died, no doubt he would have gone straight home. He’s rather conscientious about things like that.”

“Ha! You speak as if you and the demon are friends. You, who’d researched alchemy, ultimately betrayed the way of science by turning your hand to magic, and then, not satisfied with even that, summoned a demon. And in front of our band of thirty companions, the demon said, ‘I’ll give you knowledge’!”

Almost like the narrator of a silent film, Szilard began to speak in a tone that made it sound as if he was watching that long-ago scene.

“You, a companion… Don’t make me laugh.”

“You said, ‘I want to know about eternal life.’ We were given a cup of elixir that resembled liquor, and we all drank, sharing it among ourselves. …That was where our current lives began. And you learned the method for preparing this elixir of immortality! In other words, you also obtained the right to spread immortality

around the world!”

He spoke loudly, commending Maiza’s great achievement. Then he changed completely, shaking his head and lowering his voice.

“…But… The very next day, you began to spout nonsense about sealing the elixir’s production method. I will have you explain yourself now, Maiza. At first, I thought you were planning to monopolize the method…but you seem to have a loathing for immortality itself.”

Slowly and clearly, Maiza answered the question that had been tossed at him.

“One reason…is that there was a flaw in this immortality.”

“A flaw?”

“Our immortality…ends when an immortal is ‘eaten’ by someone who has the same power.”

“Hmm… But the demon said that was a system he’d created out of kindness, did he not?”

“No. It truly is a ‘demonic’ system. It can provoke murder not only among those who hate, but even among those who love each other. Think about it: Even you want to dispose of those who could kill you…myself and our other comrades. That’s what I mean. Even those who’ve overcome death by old age fear dying more than ever before. We each try to become ‘the last one.’ If even one other such person appears, inevitably we see danger where none exists, and immortals begin slaughtering one another.”

“……”

“Even those who love each other… At some point in the midst of eternity, they may think they want to know everything about the other…whether their partner truly loves them, for example. There is one sure way ‘to know everything about the other’… By ‘eating’ them, one can unlock the deepest secrets of another’s heart. If they are unable to resist this temptation…”

“People that foolish *should* consume one another and die.”

“I wonder. The thought may be foolish now. However, if immortality were to spread… If it permeated the world, the world’s ethics, religions, and laws would

change completely. Before long, thoughts like this would no doubt surface: ‘If you take all the other’s knowledge into yourself, it can be said that that person lives in you.’ If, in the future, the world naturally evolves into that sort of world, I don’t mind. However, I don’t want to be the one to create it. I like this world, you see.”

“…Hmph. In that case, you may rest easy. Giving this power to the thickheaded masses isn’t my inten—”

“And the greatest reason is—”

Maiza spoke firmly, interrupting Szilard.

“—because people like you exist.”

“In order to increase his own knowledge, Master Szilard began to ‘eat’ the alchemists on the ship, those who had been his companions. Maiza’s younger brother was ‘eaten’ as well, because my master mistook him for Maiza. Immediately afterward, the survivors surrounded Master Szilard, and he threw himself into the ocean… The surviving alchemists drifted to New York. Master Szilard also reached the American continent without succumbing to death.”

Firo was captivated by Ennis’s story. He’d never even heard of this “alchemy” field before, and then, on top of that, there was the business about immortality. It sounded completely crazy, but after seeing Szilard riddled with holes and still smiling, he had no choice but to believe it.

Come to think of it, that must have been why Maiza’s bloodstain had disappeared the previous night. As various things clicked into place, Firo listened attentively.

“…Look, don’t call a jerk like him master, all right? What are you to him?”

Darker shadows crossed Ennis’s face.

“…I’m… You might say I am Szilard himself.”

“And anyway… Why do you want to know how to make the elixir of immortality? You’ll only increase the number of people who can kill you.”

Maiza asked a perfectly natural question. As he did so, he kept a regular distance between himself and Szilard.

“…Paracelsus’s homunculus could not survive outside its flask.”

“……?”

Maiza had heard Paracelsus’s name before. Homunculi were beings made by human hands. Paracelsus, the world-famous alchemist, was said to have created one. It had been a little person, small enough to fit inside a flask, and had been unable to leave that prison.

That said, after the death of Paracelsus, the homunculus had vanished as well, or so the story went.

“A perfect homunculus, born of knowledge, is in possession of *all* knowledge from the time of its birth. Originally, we attempted to create artificial life in the hopes of gaining that perfect knowledge. …This isn’t your field, but you do know that much, correct?”

In contrast to Maiza, Szilard remained obviously relaxed as he spoke.

“It was outside my field as well, to begin with, but… Some of the knowledge I ‘ate’ had made significant headway in that research, and so I put it to use.”

Maiza hadn’t known that one of the alchemists on the ship had progressed that far in his studies.

In any case, more than that, Maiza couldn’t forgive the fact that that knowledge—or rather, the life of the comrade who had had that knowledge—had been consumed by a man like Szilard.

Disregarding the hatred in Maiza’s eyes, Szilard cheerfully continued his explanation:

“A homunculus: a tiny, artificial life, born inside a flask. Not only that, but if not provided with a steady supply of human blood, it dies. It sounds like a very fragile creature, does it not? And so, as I am quite merciful, I had an idea: I would give these fragile beings the power of immortality.”

Abruptly, a leg fell off a mutilated chair. At the clatter, Szilard’s gaze shifted slightly.

Taking advantage of the opening, Maiza closed the distance in one sprint, thrusting his right hand out.

“Simple-minded fool.”

As if he’d anticipated the move, Szilard quickly twisted around. He was still holding the machine gun. Maiza’s right arm was caught up in that rotation…and a sound not often heard in everyday life echoed through the room.

Snnnap.

“Among the knowledge Szilard acquired was information related to homunculi… To artificial life. In simple terms, it’s, um…the creation of a person without intercourse between a man and woman. Two types of cells were used as catalysts in my creation: Szilard’s own immortal cells…and cells from a woman. Apparently he kidnapped one about my own age. It seems to have been quite different from the original production method the man called Paracelsus used…”

At that point, Ennis paused for breath. She turned to Firo and went on: “Technically, those cells should have returned to Szilard immediately, but… Possibly because he used the failed product as culture liquid when he created me, I grew to the same age as my ‘mother’ inside the cultivation tank. Then, as my physical nature was the same as Szilard’s, I stopped growing.”

“…Uh… In other words?”

“As an independently mobile colony, I am able to receive knowledge from Szilard. Conversely, Szilard can separate the composite elements of the woman’s cells inside my own cells from the composite elements of his immortal cells—”

“Wait, wait, wait. I’m not a smart guy… Use short words, all right?” Firo begged, putting his hands to his head.

“If Szilard is the company’s main store, I am a branch store. Think of each colony’s intellect as the managers of those respective stores. The main store can fire my intellect, the manager of the branch store, at any time.”

“…Meaning…what?”

“…Meaning, if Szilard wills it, I’ll die very easily.”

At that, for the first time, anger flashed across Firo’s face.

“What’s up with that? That’s the most selfish thing I ever heard!”

“I think I’m something like a daughter as far as Szilard is concerned.”

“What kind of parent can kill his daughter anytime and uses that as a threat to work her like a slave?! Don’t worry, you’re way too pretty to be the daughter of a crafty old guy like him. You don’t look a thing like him. I’ll vouch for that… Well, anyway, don’t worry.”

“Huh? …But…”

“It’s fine, just don’t worry! Besides, Maiza and the other guys are probably beating that geezer like a rug right about now…”

At that point, their conversation trailed off.

“Wow. Dating in broad daylight… Punks sure do things differently these days.”

When Firo and Ennis turned, they saw a familiar face.

“Oh… You’re from yesterday…”

“Dallas… Why are you here?”

Like Firo, Ennis also seemed surprised.

“Well, well… You’re here, too, huh, doll? …That’s great. Real convenient.”

When they looked, the two behind Dallas were holding tommy guns at the ready.

“…What the hell?”

“That should be pretty obvious. They’re machine guns. Ha! Ha-ha…”

The two gunmen beside Dallas smiled wryly.

“Well, uh, just so’s you know, doll: We’re cutting ties with that guy Szilard. And as our last big event in this town, we came to rub out that punk. …Only, you did a real number on us, too, remember? So we’ll plug you while we’re at it.”

Dallas’s group had heard that Ennis was immortal as well, but they’d decided that as long as they made their getaway before she regenerated, it wouldn’t be a problem.

“Got any last words, punk?”

“I’m curious as to how you gentlemen got those guns…Dallas.”

It wasn’t Firo who’d spoken.

When Dallas turned, cautiously, toward the voice behind him, he found a gun pressed to his head. Keith and Berga had their pieces trained on the other two cronies.

“Uh… Hey, c’mon… Luck… Gimme a break, mister.”

“Just answer the question, if you would.”

Luck’s gun dug into Dallas’s forehead, right between his eyes.

What were they doing here? Without the slightest suspicion that it might be because they’d killed four people, Dallas desperately tried to think of a way to break out of the situation. If he got blown away here, Ennis might fetch Szilard while he was regenerating. That meant his advantage of immortality might as well not exist.

“The guns were… That Firo punk over there was hiding them. We found them.”

On the spur of the moment, Dallas decided to lie. He went on, talking fast, so that Ennis wouldn’t have time to deny it.

“To tell you the truth, we were watching that kid last night, planning to hit him with a surprise attack…and the punk headed over to your place with a machine gun! After that, we heard all this gunfire from your hideout…”

Dallas was trying to pin last night’s massacre on Firo. They’d catch on to the lie right away, of course, but all he had to do was distract his opponent for an instant. If he could get that muzzle to shift down slightly… If he got shot in the head, things would get nasty, but he could probably take a shot to the body without passing out. If he grabbed that chance to slash the other guy’s throat with his knife…

“…How do you know about the incident last night? It hasn’t been in the papers yet…”

“Huh? L-like I said, we followed Firo over there to…”

“…Are you under the impression that we’re on bad terms with the Martillos?”

“Huh?”

“Last night…the three of us were *with* Firo.”

“Wha…?”

“We grew up in the same tenement. Our precious sworn brother was being promoted, so we attended the celebration. …That’s right, until quite late… While Mike and the others were getting killed!”

A shot rang out, and part of Dallas’s head was blown away. Immediately afterward, Keith and Berga also fired. The remaining two crumpled to the ground, heads blown off, Thompsons still in their hands.

“We’re not letting you shoulder that on your own.”

“……”

As his two older brothers grinned at him, the youngest spoke, sounding troubled:

“I’m sorry, Berga, Keith… I was the least calm of any of us…”

“…Don’t worry about it.”

Keith used his vocal chords for the first time in about a day.

Firo, who’d been watching, spoke to the three of them:

“Thanks. You saved us.”

“No… We heard machine gun fire, and when we came around back, we found this. Firo… We have no idea what’s going on here. Could you explain what happened?”

“I absolutely will, but later. Right now, I’ve got to go find my boss, and…this…”

When he’d gotten that far, Firo realized he didn’t know her name yet.

Meanwhile, Ennis wasn’t sure what to do. Who were these three? Should she tell them about the regenerating bodies? In the first place, Firo was an enemy, too, and yet…

…Ennis was already unable to think of him as an enemy.

“Hey, Keith. How’re we gonna hide these bodies? …Hold it… Say, Luck, these guys have machine guns. Couldn’t we call it straight-up self-defense?”

“Wait, please! …First tie up those three men on the ground…”

Without thinking, her mouth went on ahead of her.

Firo and the others looked at her curiously.

“They’re also… They’re imperfect, but they are immortals.”

“…What?”

“? Hey, what’s the dame saying? These guys are perfectly *dead*…”

As he spoke, Berga looked over at the corpses. Then his face tensed.

“…What the…?”

The head he’d blown away had been neatly repaired.

…And its eyes were wide open.

“Wha…?”

The next instant, a huge shudder ran through Berga’s body. A storm of bullets blasted up from below, punching through him.

“Uooooh…ou…”

Gushing blood from his bullet-riddled torso, he crashed to the ground.

“Berga…?”

“…Berga!”

No one—not the other two brothers, not Firo, not even Ennis—understood what had happened.

“Why…? How can they have regenerated so quickly…?”

Ennis didn’t know it, but they’d already had their heads destroyed once, and their bodies had gotten proportionately used to regenerating. In addition, it was also possible that since their bodies were younger than the old men Ennis was used to seeing, the basic speed of regeneration was faster for them.

Maybe because they hadn’t had time to shut down the fuses in their brains (even though their heads had been cleanly blown off), Dallas and the others were conscious as soon as they regenerated.

Without the luxury of smiling, Dallas’s group turned the weapons they held on the remaining four.

A deafening roar echoed through the alley.

“You’re weak… Is that all you’ve managed in two hundred years?”

Maiza lay on the floor. His broken arm was quietly regenerating.

“You seem to have trained on your own. I used a more rational method. I gave powerful men the failed product… Ah, which is something I made based on the half of the production method you told your brother. In any case, if you give it to someone, they’ll still age, but they won’t die. And here’s the important part…”

He took one step, then another, drawing nearer to Maiza, who hadn’t yet finished regenerating.

“…They can be ‘eaten.’ Only by those of us who drank the finished product; it doesn’t work the other way around… In other words, I give that to someone powerful, and then I ‘eat’ him. Could any training method be faster or more reliable? Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Szilard opened the crate that sat on the table, checking to make sure the amount of liquor inside hadn’t gone down.

“So you really hadn’t given it to anyone…”

“…? What are you talking about?”

“…Oho, didn’t you know? This…is the elixir of immortality, the same one we once drank. I finally managed to complete it on my own.”

The blender he’d hired had been the one who’d actually completed it, but Szilard declared he’d done it himself anyway.

“…That’s impossible!”

“I don’t know how you got this case, but I suppose I’ll find out when I ‘eat’ you. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha…”

Laughing mechanically, Szilard looked down at Maiza, lying at his feet.

“Still… They were quite a pack of fools here, weren’t they.”

He looked around at the corpses of the executives that littered the area.

“Or did you ask the demon and manipulate their souls?”

“…You’ll…probably never understand it…”

“No, I will. In a moment, after I ‘eat’ you, I’ll understand it as a matter of course.”

Szilard bent down, slowly stretching his right hand toward Maiza’s head.

Just then, he heard a deafening roar from outside.

“What’s that…?”

He didn’t recall giving Ennis a machine gun. He’d heard three gunshots a moment ago, but he’d assumed the boy or his companions had fired them. Had reinforcements arrived, bearing machine guns?

For one brief moment, Szilard was distracted by what was happening outside.

Taking hold of the chance, Maiza grabbed both of Szilard’s ankles and simultaneously jumped to his feet. It had been sudden, and Szilard’s body made a half turn, crashing to the floor.

Maiza found himself face-to-face with his enemy’s moment of vulnerability, but he calculated he wouldn’t be able to grab Szilard’s head. Instead, using a nearby table as a step stool, he broke a window that was rather high up and leaped through it. At night, when they brought the liquor out, it was closed with a shutter, but during the day, the glass was the only barrier.

A transparent shattering sound. Maiza escaped from the speakeasy in the midst of a blizzard of glass fragments.

“You won’t get away!”

Szilard followed him, leaping out through the window.

…And was hit by a car.

“Ha-ha-ha! That was a cinch… Let’s beat it before the dame regenerates.”

Thinking that the main street would probably be in an uproar over the gunfire, Dallas’s group decided to slip out through the back of the alley.

“…Nn?”

When they’d turned the first corner and gone a little ways, they heard a noise from the far end of the alley. It sounded rather like a motor running, and

something else, as if a massive object was hitting a wall.

“What’s that…?”

The source of the sound appeared around the next corner.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me…”

It was a black passenger car, so large that it barely fit into the alley.

“I-I-I-Isaac! W-w-w-we’re slamming against the waaall!”

The sound of the car’s side scraping against the bricks set Miria’s eardrums trembling violently.

“A-a-a-and anyway, Isaac, I didn’t know you could drive cars this big.”

“D-d-d-d-don’t worry! I watched my old man drive all the time, and the b-b-b-basics seem j-j-j-just like a s-s-s-s-small c-c-c-car!”

“I-i-i-i-is that right! That’s a relief-f-f!”

As they chased after Dallas’s group, the two of them had spotted the car that had hit them. It was actually Ennis’s car, but of course they didn’t realize that. Well, and it really was the car that had hit them… But in any case.

Isaac had fiddled with the auto and gotten the engine started. They’d stolen small cars to use in getaways countless times, and their skills were truly excellent. Taking the Genoard house into consideration, it was apparently safe to say that their thieving techniques—and only their thieving techniques—were top-shelf.

“We can beat those machine guns if we hit ’em with a car!”

“We sure can!”

They felt absolutely no guilt whatsoever about stealing the car that had hit them. The only trouble was that, although they’d gotten in, they’d lost track of Dallas and the others.

At that point, they’d heard the thunder of machine guns from a nearby alley.

“Found ’em, found ’em, found ’em!”

“Yes, that’s them!”

They sped up, plowing into the three in front of them.

Panicking, Dallas's group tried to run, but they were struck the instant they turned their backs. Their momentum sent them tumbling from the hood up over the roof and around the sides, where they fell behind the car.

"We did it!"

"Isaac! The road! Watch the road!"

Maiza had suddenly appeared in their path.

"Waaaaaugh!"

Hastily, he slammed on the brakes. Maiza noticed instantly and took to his heels, so they'd somehow managed not to hit him, but…

…they sent the old man who'd jumped down right after him flying.

As a result, they accomplished their revenge for the hit-and-run, too.

Isaac and Miria hastily backed up.

They ran right up over Dallas and the others, who'd fallen behind the car, and then they were stuck.

"Uunh…"

Fully regenerated, Ennis slowly got to her feet.

"…Ah… Why…? How could this…?"

They'd been shot by Dallas's group, and only she had survived…

Not sure what to think, she gazed at the prone corpses of Firo and the others.

And then——

⇔

When Ennis rounded the corner in pursuit of Dallas's group, she was confronted with an odd—but, to her, appalling—sight.

Her own car was stopped farther down the narrow alley. Before it, Szilard had a knife to Isaac's throat. Slightly closer, Maiza stood stock-still, glaring at Szilard.

"Ah, Ennis. Excellent timing."

"Oh! Ennis!"

“Enniiis! Save Isaac!”

The three of them called her name at once.

“…What? Ennis, what is the meaning of this? Why do these two know your name?”

This was a problem. Looking disconcerted, Ennis passed by Maiza. He didn’t try to move. He only glowered at her quietly.

Apparently, Szilard had taken Isaac hostage and was keeping Maiza at bay. … Although she didn’t understand why Isaac and Miria were there.

“Ennis. I’ll hear your explanation later. …Take over for me here, until I’ve finished ‘eating’ Maiza. …If Maiza tries to resist, kill him.”

“H-hey…Ennis?”

“Ennis?”

The two of them were watching her uneasily. Shoving her agitation into the depths of her heart, Ennis spoke: “…You don’t really need to take a hostage, do you…?”

“Ah, you know how it is. Just in case.”

“……”

Wordlessly, Ennis took the knife, then restrained Isaac.

“Waugh! Ennis, you’re kidding, right?”

“E-Ennis!”

Watching Isaac and Miria panic out of the corner of his eye, Szilard approached Maiza, preparing to complete his eagerly anticipated ritual.

The machine gun had broken when he’d been hit by the car, so he drew a gun from his coat and shot Maiza through both knees.

“Gagh…”

With the joints destroyed, Maiza fell to his knees. This put his head at the perfect height to be consumed.

“Keh-keh… You value the lives of those two? How droll. No, no, I understand

emotions like love and friendship myself, and I know humans can die or show strength for their sake."

Beaming, he took another step closer.

"It's just that, personally, I can't stand them."

As she watched Szilard walk away, Ennis spoke to Isaac and Miria in a whisper.

"…When that old man touches Maiza, hurry and run from here."

"E-Ennis…? Oh, what a relief… I knew you were really Ennis!"

"Yes, she's Ennis!"

The pair responded, also in whispers.

But they don't know anything about me… Once again, Ennis's feelings were bittersweet.

"Oh… But we can't… We have to save Maiza…"

"Have to save him!"

"…Why…?!"

"Because…he treated us to dinner yesterday. He's a good guy, Ennis! I don't know who that old guy is, but save him, all right?!"

"Save him! We'll do our best, too!"

Ennis wasn't able to hide her bewilderment, but she asked the two of them anyway, desperately calming herself down: "…Did you…come to save that man?"

"No, we came to save you!"

"Huh?"

Her confusion deepened.

"Well, uh… You know! Those guys you took to the police yesterday broke out of jail and were walking around with machine guns! …So we thought you'd be killed…"

"But don't worry! We hit them with the car!"

And they were currently under it.

“……”

An indescribable feeling came over Ennis. Had they known the enemy had machine guns and come anyway, not fearing even death? …Just to save *her*?

For the space of a breath, she contemplated. It felt long, but in terms of time, it was only three and a half seconds. She’d never thought so seriously and come to a resolution about anything before, not since she was born.

“…Isaac. Miria.”

“…Hmm?”

“What?”

Her parting words were brief.

“I’m sorry… Thank you. I’m really glad I was able to talk to you, at the end. If you’ll let me make one selfish request…”

Ennis smiled sadly, quietly lowered the knife, and released Isaac.

“Please don’t forget me.”

Without giving Isaac and Miria time to respond, Ennis broke into a run, knife in hand.

…Toward her master and “main body,” Szilard.

“To continue our earlier conversation… The girl in the suit is the homunculus I created. Well, since she’s the same size as a human, the term *homunculus* —‘little man’—doesn’t really apply. In addition, creating her from both male and female cells wasn’t quite the proper way to do it, but even so…”

Szilard stopped, looking down at Maiza, his expression filled with superiority. He had a gun in his left hand, and despair in his right.

“I don’t know whether it was because I used the failed product to cultivate her or whether the fundamental method was wrong, but Ennis—that girl—was born with no knowledge whatsoever. She’s useless. Once I’ve ‘eaten’ you, I may use the finished product as culture liquid… Or, no, I’ll have your knowledge anyway: I can simply summon the demon and ask him.”

After he’d conceitedly wrapped up the matter for himself, Szilard’s right hand

reached for Maiza's forehead.

"Good-bye, Maiza. And…welcome."

In the very moment his right hand touched his prey's forehead…

"Gakh…?"

There was a strong impact at his back, and he felt something enter his body. His sense of pain was already gone, so all that came to him was an odd undulation in the neighborhood of his skin.

When Szilard turned, there was Ennis, quiet, a sorrowful expression on her face.

The blade of the knife she held was buried deep in Szilard's spine.

"…Ennis… What is the meaning of this? …No, never mind. The time for explanations is past."

At the same moment, a shout went up from the corner of the alley:

"Maiza!"

Firo, who should have been dead, yelled and came running.

⇔

The noise of gunfire was still coming from Alveare.

"You four, split up and watch the ends of that alley. Don't go in until you're ordered to; this is *our* turf."

Having received a report, Edward arrived at the scene with a large squad of policemen in tow.

"…What happened?"

When he opened the double doors and entered the shop, the proprietress was standing there in a daze.

"I, um… I don't really know… Some strange old man just hit me, out of the blue…"

Warily, Edward entered the speakeasy. He'd heard something that sounded like machine gun fire on the way here, so he proceeded cautiously, gun at the ready.

“…What a mess.”

The place looked as if a storm had blown through and ravaged it.

Broken chairs were scattered near the entrance, and damage that seemed to have been caused by a machine gun was evident throughout the room.

After he’d scanned the area, Edward murmured, sounding vaguely relieved:

“Well, at least there weren’t any fatalities in here.”

There wasn’t a single bloodstain in the room.

⟺

“Oho… So you let that brat through, too, Ennis…?”

Slowly, Szilard turned.

“That’s unfortunate…is something I won’t be saying. I thought it was about time. I made several others before you, but the moment they acquired unnecessary knowledge, they betrayed me. I thought things might be different with a female, so I created you… But as I expected, nothing’s changed.”

She’d never heard that she’d had brothers before. …But it didn’t matter anymore.

She tried to nail Szilard with a kick, but…

“It’s useless.”

“Ah……”

Szilard closed his eyes for an instant, and for some reason, Ennis fell to the ground. It was terribly abrupt, as if she were a marionette whose strings had been cut.

In that moment, the cellular equilibrium that had been maintained by Szilard’s power collapsed, and Ennis’s physical functions began to break down.

“I won’t kill you instantly. Suffer well before you die.”

His face, which wore a mocking smile, was hit with a fistful of pepper.

“Gwah…”

The immortal man, a man who had obtained immeasurable knowledge and

behaved as if he ruled the world, recoiled from a blinding powder of pepper. It was a ridiculous sight.

“Why, you! What did you do to Ennis?!”

“What did you do, huh?!”

The priest and nun threw bags of pepper at him in rapid succession. They looked ridiculous as well, but it also looked a bit as if they were throwing holy ashes at a demon.

“Gkh… You blasted…!”

Firo had run up while this was going on, and he began to drag Ennis and Maiza away from Szilard.

“Maiza! Are you okay?!”

The holes in his knees were already half healed. It might have been the first time his joints had been destroyed: Compared to Dallas and the others, the regeneration seemed slow.

“I’m…fine… Never mind me… The girl…”

Ennis’s face was already pale, and her eyes had begun to go white and cloudy at the centers. Even then, when she recognized Firo, she began to speak slowly, relying on her weak breath.

“…You’re… You also… I don’t know when it happened, but…you acquired immortality, didn’t you… When I…saw your wounds healing, back there…I knew…”

At her words, Maiza stared at Firo, startled.

“Yeah, I’ve got no idea when it happened either, but…”

“…Then…I have a request. It looks…as if I’m dying… Would you… ‘eat’ me…? I told you…how it was done…earlier…”

“Hey, what kind of crap are you spouting?”

“…I don’t know if a homunculus like me…will be able to go to heaven or hell… It frightened me…and I couldn’t even end my own life… Oh… There’s still…so much I want to tell Isaac and Miria… So…please…would you ‘eat’ me…and deliver my

message…? Also…no one ever told me…I was pretty before… Thank you… I was happy… …That's…all I wanted to tell you…"

At her words, Firo quietly clenched his fists…and shook his head.

"I don't have any obligation to deliver a thing like that. …Besides, I'm an atheist, so I can tell you straight out: Even if you die, there's no heaven or hell. If you die…you just disappear."

"…Ah-ha-ha… You're harsh…"

Ennis laughed; she seemed a little disappointed. Even as she did so, her cells were breaking, one after another. At this point, her heart was already very near to stopping. The moment Ennis died…Szilard's share of the elements of which she was composed would probably return to him.

Straightening up, Firo spoke flatly:

"Yeah. This world is harsh, and there is no next one. …So don't die. Forget disappearing, deliver your message yourself! Don't worry, I won't let you die because of that rotten old geezer. …And actually…I'm not gonna let you die at all!"

Maybe he'd had some sort of idea: Firo drew his knife and turned toward Szilard, who'd finally managed to shake off the pepper.

Szilard glared back at him with rage-filled eyes.

"Boy… What are you trying to—?"

Something was poured over his head from behind.

"…?"

A pungent, stinking liquid. It was liquid fuel, the sort that was used in lamps.

When Szilard turned around, Randy and the other executives were standing there. Their clothes were torn where they'd taken bullets, but there wasn't a drop of blood on them.

"You! I killed you! Impossible… All the liquor was there! Besides, Maiza would never have given it to you…!"

As Szilard shouted, he looked at Maiza, only to discover that Maiza's

expression was very like his own. In other words, he couldn't fathom what was happening here, either.

"What kind of hooey was that? Are you nuts?"

Randy was holding an empty fuel can.

"We've burned gloves and storehouses…"

A blazing red match flew from Pezzo's hand.

"…But we've never burned a head before."

Szilard's whole head ignited in pale flames.

"Gwooooooooooouh…"

Since he couldn't feel pain, he didn't feel the excessive heat, either. However, the violently leaping flames had definitely robbed Szilard of his eyesight.

Even then, somehow, he saw the brat they'd called Firo running toward him.

Was he an immortal, too?

——If he was…

Terror took root inside Szilard.

"Ooooooooouuugh! I wooon't allooooooow iiiiiiit!"

Swiftly, he thrust his right hand out at Firo, who was bearing down on him.

"Get that damn hand out of my way!"

Firo had drawn his knife from inside his jacket, and he brought it down in a fit of rage.

The blade ran between the index and middle fingers of Szilard's right hand, splitting it open down to the wrist. The knife stopped, biting into the bone, and as he held it there with his left hand…

…Firo thrust his own right hand into Szilard's blazing face.

Not caring that his own arm would be burned…

…the boy wished hard.

To devour the body in front of him, as his hatred dictated.

To gain the knowledge to save a woman whose name he didn’t know.

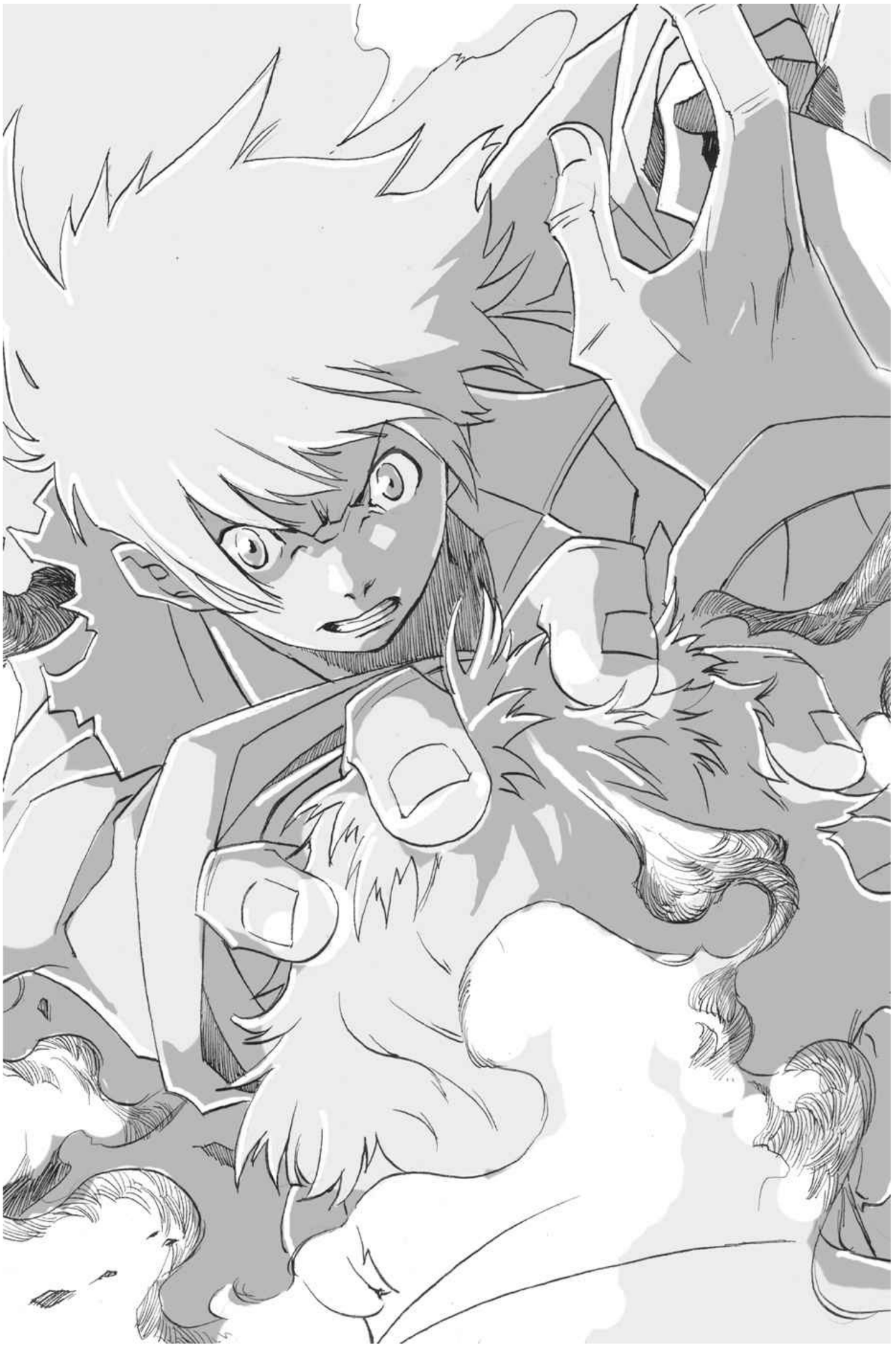
“Gahk…”

For a man who’d lived nearly three hundred years, it was far too abrupt a death.

And then——

The only remaining earthly traces of Szilard Quates were the bright conflagrations of clothes and shoes.

Before long, those burned to ashes as well and were scattered by the wind.



⇔

Edward opened the back door just as Szilard's leather shoes began to burn.

"…What the hell…?"

None of the police officers, Edward included, had any idea what had happened. Shoes were on fire, the Martillo Family executives were assembled, the priest and nun from earlier were there, a car with a badly dented body was stopped farther down the alley, and the whole place stank of liquid fuel.

"What's going on? …Explain this, Firo Prochainezo."

He strode over to the tired-looking boy and hauled him up by his collar.

"From what I've seen, it doesn't look as though anyone died, but… Are you planning to start a handgun orchestra or something?"

"…I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't play dumb with me! We've been getting civilian complaints about nonstop gunfire around here! You want me to haul you in for violating the Sullivan Act?!"

Just then, a roar echoed through the area.

The squad of police officers hastily ducked, shoving their hands into their jackets and looking around for the source of the noise.

On top of the car, the priest and nun had machine guns pointed at the sky. They were the tommy guns Dallas and the others had been carrying.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! The Martillo Family's treasure is ours!"

"Yes, it's ours!"

"So long, incompetent policemen! And by the way, the Martillos haven't done anything!"

"Not a thing!"

On that irresponsible note, they tossed the guns away and took to their heels. They'd probably spoken out of consideration for the Martillos, but the last half of that line had been synonymous with "The Martillos did something."

"…Assistant Inspector…uh… Can we shoot?"

“No… They’re unarmed now.”

Why a priest? After giving it a little thought, he realized that something about them did ring a bell.

“…The bandaged bandits!”

“…Huh?”

“Never mind, just go after them! As long as they don’t have a gun, don’t shoot!”

Edward swiftly issued orders for their arrest to his bewildered men.

The policemen scrambled to follow them, and then Edward was the only police representative left.

“All right. You can’t hoodwink me with something like that, Firo.”

Just then, two more men appeared from inside the speakeasy.

“Ah… Edward, there you are.”

“We need your help with something. C’mere a second.”

It was Bill and Donald.

“But…”

“We’ll tell you what you want to know, too.”

“…What do you mean?”

“Come along and you’ll see,” Donald said, simply.

Edward hesitated a little, but in the end, he went with them.

After Edward had disappeared into Alveare, Bill spoke to Maiza.

“Uh… What happened to Szilard?”

At those words, Maiza gaped at the men in front of him.

Realizing who they really were, he gave them a straightforward explanation.

“Ah. He…disappeared.”

“Erm… Into you?”

Maiza smiled a bit mischievously as he answered:

“I can’t leak organization secrets to law enforcement, you know.”

After the police were gone, Maiza asked Firo:

“Firo… I don’t understand. When did you and the others become immortal? You have Szilard’s knowledge now. You do know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

“Uh… Well…”

Nervously, Firo confessed:

“I saved this old guy yesterday.”

“I see…”

“He was carrying some liquor, and I switched it out on him on the sly. We’d bought four bottles of liquor, and I dumped out two. Then I poured the contents of the old guy’s bottles into the empties, and filled his bottles with the liquor from our last two…”

Firo had done it on a whim. If the old guy had given him a genuine thank-you, he would have told him the truth and given them back; if he cussed at him, the plan had been to keep quiet and swipe them.

“What you take, you share with the rest. I was just obeying Camorra law…”

“Don’t tell me… You passed it around to everyone at that party?”

“…Come to think of it… If I’d done it right, I probably could’ve switched two bottles and gotten by with only dumping one, couldn’t I…”

That hardly seemed to be a major problem.

“Firo…”

“Well, once I got Szilard’s knowledge, it all made sense, but… Maiza…”

At that point, Firo gave a forced smile and continued, addressing a stunned-looking Maiza: “Coincidences really do happen, don’t they…”

⟺

The priest and nun ran at full speed, from alley to alley, toward a fleeting freedom.

The hum of the crowd was growing gradually louder. It was proof that they were close to a major street.

“This is bad.”

“Yes, it’s bad!”

Just as the mouth of the alley came into view, they realized there were two police officers standing in it.

The policemen seemed to have noticed them as well, but the pair didn’t let it faze them. Without slowing down, they yelled: “Aaaah! Mr. Policeman, help us!”

“Save us!”

Their charade had been off-the-cuff, but thanks to their appearance, it seemed to have worked. Given their abrupt arrival, the officers hesitated.

Diving against the chest of one of the policemen, Miria trembled in an exaggerated way and cried: “A-a-a-armed men just started chasing us!”

She wasn’t lying.

The police officers, who’d only managed to grasp about half the situation, overreacted to her words. Their hands went to their holsters, and they fixed tense eyes on the depths of the alley.

…But what appeared from around the corner was a group in familiar uniforms.

“Wha…!”

By the time the policemen had hastily turned back, the two had already broken into a run again and were weaving through the crowd.

The pair mounted the NYPD-issued police horses that had been waiting nearby and started after the two, but they were blocked by the very people they’d sworn to protect.

“Meeerry Christmaaaas!”

As Isaac shouted, he took bundles of bills from his bag and threw them high in the air, scattering them.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You’re early, too early! You’re a month early!”

As Miria laughed and whooped, the avenue was transformed into a coliseum.

The bills took flight like a storm of confetti, and under their spell, the crowd began to gather them indiscriminately.

Men holding placards that said GIVE ME A JOB, panhandlers who'd been crying that their legs were broken, fine ladies on their way home with liquor they'd purchased, cargo-truck drivers, freight wagon operators, and even the well-to-do with purses full of money—all began to converge on the extremely easy-to-understand "blessing" of money.

Grab more money, faster, more tightly… It was a battle royal in an arena governed by simple rules. Confronted with surging waves of happy hysteria, the horses were unable to overcome the murderous intent of the combatants. … Even if they had been able to overcome it, it was doubtful whether they would have been physically able to disperse that crowd.

Watching the dismayed policemen out of the corners of their eyes, Isaac and Miria kept running toward the station. Among those who robbed banks, the fact that you scattered money as you made your getaway was basic knowledge. It was effective precisely because everyone knew it… Or at least that was what Isaac believed, and in fact it had worked.

If there was any problem at all, it was that they'd scattered most of their total earnings (99 percent of which had been the Genoard legacy) by the time they reached the station.

That said, these two weren't the type to care about something that important.

"Now, then… Where shall we run, Miria?"

"Anywhere!"

"Well, let's see… Want to head back to LA and try digging up some gold?"

"A gold rush! But that isn't robbery… Are we turning over a new leaf?"

"Uh… Well, no, it's the other thing: We'll be filching a fortune from the earth!"

"That's *amazing*!"

Even as they kept up their usual sort of conversation, one thing bothered the pair: "…We didn't get to say good-bye to Ennis and everybody, did we?"

"…No, we didn't."

At the entrance to the station, the two thieves looked back once.

As they gazed at the kaleidoscopically shifting city, Isaac murmured quietly: "This was an interesting town, wasn't it."

"Yes, really interesting!"

"Let's come back again, to see Ennis and the rest."

“Absolutely!”

Taking the last bundle of bills out of the bag, Isaac stepped into the station to buy two tickets to California.

“This is all we’ve got left.”

“Uh-huh… But we gave it away to everybody, so we did something good! I know we did!”

“I see… Yes, you’re right. I bet the late Mr. Genoard is happy, too, don’t you think?”

“And all the dead children!”

“Then let’s split the difference and wish for happiness for Mr. Genoard’s children.”

“Yes, let’s! They won’t fight over the inheritance now, and I bet they’re all living happily together as we speak!”

The two held fast to their self-serving proclamations right up to the very end. With that, the couple who had been the guests of honor at this *baccano*, this crazy ruckus, disappeared from New York.

Just before they boarded the train, the pair spotted a sign with WELCOME TO NYC! written on it.

To commemorate their departure from the city, on his way out, Isaac left a certain mark on that sign.

It was graffiti of a big bite mark, drawn on top of the picture of the apple that stood for New York.

⇔

When Dallas Genoard woke up, he was in a dark warehouse.

“Are you awake?”

Right in front of him were three men he was positive he’d shot to death earlier.

For his part, he’d been put into an oil drum, and his hands and feet were bound. His head was the only thing outside the drum, and he looked around, nervously. When he did, he discovered that his two buddies were in the same

state.

“Ah, this place is a bit like a summer home for us. The police are prowling around our house and the hideout, you see…”

“Wh… Why… Why are you alive?!”

Luck answered Dallas’s scream, speaking for his brothers.

“That’s a very good question. Firo just called and told us a few things… But we’re under no obligation to tell you any of it. Worry about it until your lives run out.”

They’d been at that party as well. Meaning, since they’d drunk *that* toast, they’d also joined the ranks of the immortal. Of course, Dallas and the others had no way of knowing this.

Before Dallas could speak, Keith came up and put something into the drum.

It was a deck of cards.

“……?”

“You’re a real nice guy, Keith…,” Luck offered. “He says you’ll probably be bored on the ocean floor until you die of old age… So.”

When the meaning of those words sank in, Dallas’s group was assailed by desperate terror.

The fifty-two jokers that had been dropped into the oil drum sneered coldly at Dallas’s fate.

“You’ll be able to drown perpetually for another seventy years or so. That’s phenomenal. …It’s probably a world record, you know. Unfortunately, no one’s going to document it…”

“See, I wanted to just finish you off here and now, but you won’t die even if we slug you or drill you, so there’s no help for it… Hey, how about a radio to help kill time?”

Berga spoke, sounding entertained.

“Ha-ha-ha, the battery will die.”

“Oh, yeah. …What about a chess set, then?”

“The board will float up through the water. A Conan Doyle novel, perhaps?”

“The paper’ll get all wet.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“……Heh.”

After laughing a bit, all three looked into Dallas’s eyes.

Their gazes were terribly cold. Cold enough to bring Dallas to tears.

“Go on… Choose. Which do you want?”

⇔

The members’ meeting place. When night fell and the old men assembled, Szilard was nowhere to be seen. Instead, five or six policemen were waiting for them. Edward, Bill, and Donald were among them.

“Wha… What are you?!”

“Erm… We’re the police.”

Bill gave a terse explanation to the old men, who were howling blue murder.

“Uh… You’re under suspicion for illegally distilling liquor, so we came to investigate.”

“Wha—? On what grounds?!”

“Well… There was a fire yesterday, you see, and this turned up in the ruins.”

He took out a soot-smeared bottle. It was, beyond a doubt, one of the bottles Barnes had been in charge of.

“Hmm… It’s nothing to do with you? …Well, then.”

He moved as if to dash the bottle to the floor. The old men screamed in unison.

“Haaa… You’re terribly easy to read. That’s nice.”

“Quit playing around, Bill.”

Donald picked up the conversation:

“The Bureau has been aware of your organization for quite a while now. We

knew about Szilard, too, and about the liquor you were trying to make."

A stir ran through the old men.

"Wh…why would the Bureau know about Master Szilard…?"

"Uh… Well, you see, one of our higher-ups is extraordinarily long-lived as well… To be honest, we came to New York on orders from above…to dispose of this liquor.

"'Never close a case.' That's our motto at the Bureau. According to our boss, that goes for unscientific incidents from two hundred years ago as well."

"H-hey! Edward!"

Someone called his name. It was the man at the top of his list of irritating bosses: Police Superintendent Veld. That meant even high-ranking police officials had been among Szilard's followers… But at the same time, it also meant Szilard hadn't managed to grab any more power than that.

"Edward! Do something! Stop them! If we have that liquor, the world can be ours! We'll be evolved humans! You want that privilege, too, don't you? So… Hey, Edward! Say something!"

Edward was so exasperated that it actually calmed him down.

He even began to smile. Really, there was nothing to do but laugh.

"Superintendent… If you'd at least said, 'We can rid the world of disease and accidental death,' I might have thought about it, but… Frankly, you've disappointed me."

"E-Edward!"

"Superintendent… If it's a choice between personal eternity and eternity for our country, I choose the country."

Edward took the bottle from Bill.

"And since I am a police officer, I can't overlook something made in violation of the law."

With no hesitation, he hurled the bottle into the corner of the room.

As the old men shrieked, the bottle smashed to bits.

Some of the old men tried to lap up the liquor spreading across the floor, but as if he'd seen this coming, Donald struck a match and tossed it to the ground.

The alcohol blazed up, illuminating the despairing faces of the old men with a beautiful, fleeting light.

The detectives splashed water onto it from a bucket one of the police officers had been holding, and both the fire and dreams of immortality disappeared in the blink of an eye. They'd intended to break the bottle in front of the men all along.

"Erm… Well, then… Do your best at your jobs until you die of old age, gentlemen. Depending on how you work, your honor may live eternally as the foundation of this country. And… Oh, and by the way, Mr. Szilard won't be coming back."

Saying their good-byes to the old men, who were busy fainting or bawling, Edward and the others left the basement.

As they swayed in the car Donald was driving, Edward muttered resentfully: "… You tricked me."

At first, he'd been unable to swallow their story of the liquor of immortality. However, when he saw the rat that had been discovered at the scene of the fire —the rat that had survived even as it burned—he'd had no choice but to believe.

"Erm… Sorry."

"But why did you tell me everything?"

Donald answered that question briefly.

"Our boss… He isn't at the top of the Bureau of Investigation, but he's fairly high up. He heard you were stubborn but had a strong sense of justice, and that you wouldn't bend to bribes or violence, and apparently he took a shine to you."

"…How did he know about me?"

"You applied to the Bureau. We vet our applicants much more thoroughly than you'd imagine."

"……"

“Erm… We’ll look forward to working with you in the future.”

Bill and Donald gave sly grins.

Edward shook his head and smiled wryly, responding to the two who were slated to become his senior colleagues.

“…When that happens, no more secrets.”

Afterward, Edward became one of the leading agents at the Bureau of Investigation, which would later be known as the FBI. At this point in time, he didn’t yet know that Firo and the others had become immortal, but once he found out the whole story, he fell into the habit of declaring, “There are some fellas I have to put away for life and turn into permanent jailbirds.” …They say that he’d laugh and repeat those words whenever he remembered Firo and Maiza.

⇔

“…Oh…”

After Edward and the others had gone, Maiza slumped to his knees.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Maiza?!”

“I’ve… What have I done…?”

Now that he’d heard everything from Firo, Maiza was on the verge of being swallowed up by guilt. Because of him, his companions, Firo included, had been pulled into the eternal cycle.

“Huh? Wait… Maiza, what are you saying?!”

“The pain of living for eternity… And to you, all of you, of all people…”

“What are you talking about?! We don’t care! And actually, it feels more like, ‘We don’t have to die, yahoo!’ Right, guys?” As Firo hastily contradicted Maiza’s thoughts, he turned to Randy and the others, who were beside him, for support.

“Huh? I-I don’t really get it, but ‘yahoo.’”

“Yahoo! Cheer up, Maaaizaaa.”

Randy and Pezzo started to dance. The fact that they’d become immortal didn’t seem to have really sunk in yet. Apparently the other executives didn’t

understand either: They watched the dancing pair and guffawed.

“And look, if we don’t tell the boss and Yaguruma, we can sweep it under the rug by saying, ‘Wow, you’re long-lived’!”

However, the anguish hadn’t cleared from Maiza’s expression.

“Firo… If you have Szilard’s knowledge, then you know…to be honest…I’m tired of living. Now that Szilard, my brother’s enemy, is dead, there’s no point in living any longer… Of course! Firo…would you…?”

When he’d heard him out that far, Firo’s face grew a little earnest, and he answered.

“I can’t do that. …Listen, if you’re gone, which of us is going to be able to count up the money? Maiza, are you planning to sink us?”

“…Drat, that’s a good point… Oh, but wait, if you ‘eat’ me, you’ll have my knowledge of accounting—”

“No. I’m dumb. Even if I get knowledge, I forget it right away. …As a matter of fact, I’m already starting to forget the knowledge I got from Szilard.”

“You won’t do it, no matter what…?”

“Look, Maiza. Camorra law says that if you kill a comrade, no matter the reason, you pay with your life. I don’t want to die yet, so please, gimme a break.”

“…That’s a problem… You’re making too much sense…”

Maiza smiled. Firo smiled back.

“*Incidentally*… If you disappear, we’ll be lonesome, so stick around. All right?” Then, at last, the two of them broke into loud laughter.

“Um…”

At the sound of a woman’s voice, they turned. A girl in a black suit was standing there.

“Why did you…save…?”

The first thing Firo had done with Szilard’s knowledge was return life to the dying Ennis. He’d taken the links of life Szilard had severed, set them resonating with his own immortal cells, and closed the links again. With that, it wasn’t too

much to say that Ennis, who'd called herself part of Szilard's body…was now a part of Firo's.

"Oh! That's right, of course! Edward just came out of nowhere, and I completely forgot… I'm sorry!"

Ennis only looked bewildered.

"My name is Firo Prochainezo. …I was looking for you because you were attractive. I saved you because there was something I wanted to ask you."

"Something you wanted to ask…?"

Ennis was at a loss. Firo smiled as he spoke.

"…I want you to tell me your name."

"Huh…?"

After a little thought, Ennis answered.

"Wasn't it…in Szilard's knowledge?"

Firo shook his head in an exaggerated gesture, grinning awkwardly.

"Uh…well…you know. …I want to hear it from you."

At that, the rest of the crowd started to hoot at them. "Look, it's not like I confessed to her or anything! What are you guys, grade-schoolers?!" Firo argued back, but nobody listened. Led by Randy and Pezzo, everyone cheerfully "yahooed," making fun of them.

Just as if it were the happy ending to some movie…everyone there was smiling.

"That ruckus was something else. What in the world happened?"

"…From what I hear, a priest was throwing around bundles of money."

As they walked down the broad street, which echoed with the cries of countless panhandlers, Ronny answered his leader respectfully.

"Oho… And here I thought priests only used God's name to get money *from* people. That's real admirable. Well done… Heck, God doesn't usually save even the ones who believe in him…"

At Yaguruma's blunt comment, Molsa reprimanded him:

“Yaguruma… Don’t sell God short. The guy’s only flaw is that…he’s incredibly capricious. That’s all.”

The upper-level executives had returned from work. For some reason, they’d seen lots of cops around the speakeasy, so they’d decided to go around back, just in case. …And there were all the executives, making a racket.

“What’s going on? Why are they horsing around outside?”

Yaguruma cocked his head, looking puzzled.

Ronny gazed at Firo and the others, looking as if he’d seen something rather unexpected.

“I noticed it during the toast last night, but…in the end, I didn’t stop it. I had the vague idea that, if it was us, we’d stick with it for a long time. …Well, never mind.”

“Nn? What was that? What are you muttering about?”

“Nothing. …They look like they’re having fun.”

“Well, it’s good to be young.”

The two of them smiled, agreeing with the words of their leader, who was holding a huge armful of pepper.

The spiral came tumbling down. When they poked their heads out of the rubble…

…they found the beginning of a new one.

There was just one difference: This spiral went on forever.

That’s simply all there was.

EPILOGUE...2

EPILOGUE…2

“All right… The tale ends here.”

I’d been listening, riveted, but he clapped his hands lightly in front of me, and then I remembered I was a person from 2002.

“This story has no planet-destroying monsters, no princesses in towers, no fortunes large enough to purchase the world. Even so, as far as we’re concerned, it’s a fine legend.”

He’d pulled me right in. Whether it was true or not, it had been an interesting yarn. …But was a string of coincidences like that really possible?

“Ha-ha-ha. In this world, is there any notable piece of history in which coincidences were not involved?”

I didn’t know, but it sounded convincing.

“…So, did you believe that preposterous tale?”

Were you lying?

“No.”

Then, why not? What problem could there be with that?

Maybe my answer had satisfied him: The man said he’d treat me, and ordered dessert.

“You really are an unusual person. It makes me glad I confided in you. When talking of the past, there can’t be many listeners as exemplary as you.”

I don’t remember doing anything that would warrant a compliment. …And in any case, that might have been roundabout sarcasm.

But… What part of what he’d related had been “the lonely tale of a miserable man”?

“Szilard was a lonely, pitiful man, wasn’t he?”

…Him, huh?

Still, what had happened to the people in the story afterward? The thieving couple, for example.

“Right over there.”

He glanced at a rather dim-looking couple farther back in the restaurant. They were both wrapped in chains from head to toe, and—I’m not sure what about this was festive—lots of bells hung from the chains. Talk about a pop culture overload.

In that case, the fat guy and the skinny guy sitting in that corner are…

“Pezzo and Randy, yes. Lately, Pezzo keeps complaining that because his body’s like this, even if he wants to lose weight, the fat regenerates right away, but he’s still eating five meals a day.”

…Okay, then what happened to Firo?

“Huh?”

He gave me a strange look.

“I’m right here. …Oh, I was speaking as a storyteller, so I talked about myself in the third person as well, but… Ah… That’s right, I hadn’t told you my name yet. Generally, when I do business with someone, we get all the way to the end and part ways without my ever introducing myself.”

…Good lord. I’d just assumed this guy was Maiza…

“Oh, Maiza’s… He taught me the ABCs of being *contaiuolo*, then left on a journey about thirty years ago. He said he was going to look for fellow alchemists who’d scattered around the world. …If he keeps his promise, he should be returning soon.”

Was that how things were…? Still, he wasn’t at all the way I’d pictured him. I told him so, straight-out.

“Well, it’s been more than seventy years since then. Even I’ve learned how to carry myself. The glasses are a fashion item, just for show. What do you think?”

With that, Firo Prochainezo smiled cheerfully. He looked happy. I was a little

jealous.

Come to think of it, what was Ennis up to now?

“Oh, she’s my wife.”

…There, see, *now* I’m jealous.

“Well… Only… In a romance novel or picture book, we probably would have fallen in love with each other right then…but…”

Firo went on, looking a little embarrassed:

“You know. Ennis started without a sense for love or any such emotion, so… erm… Apparently it was just me, getting carried away on my own, and… Well, and I was the only one who’d fallen in love at first sight, after all…”

Giving a slightly dejected smile, he confessed a certain truth:

“The upshot was that it took us quite a long time to get married. Just about… fifty years.”

That’s pretty awful. …Talk about being a late bloomer.

I was surprised they hadn’t gotten sick of each other, after having been together for more than half a century. On the other hand, you could say it showed just how well they hit it off.

No, wait… In a way, Ennis is part of Firo’s body, so…isn’t that narcissism? The thought was too meaningless to mention.

“Anyway, all sorts of things have happened since then, but we’re doing pretty well. …Although things were tough when Prohibition was repealed and our revenue dropped…”

After that, he grumbled a bit about securing new revenue and their troubles with turf wars. …Even so, it was clear to me that they were all enjoying life. It was someone else’s business, but I was as happy about it as if it had been my own.

“Did you know? They say that Eliot Ness, the Prohibition agent and hero of the Untouchables, was destroyed by alcoholism in his later years. …Ironic, isn’t it.”

As we were entertaining ourselves with stories like that one, the young guy

from earlier returned. In his hands, he held a gleaming silver camera bag! Welcome home, my camera.

“Ah, Ronny… Thanks for going to all that trouble.”

“No, my hands were free. There’s no problem. Still, Bobby’s group is pretty dim, aren’t they? Pulling a stunt like that on our turf…”

Ronny… Oh, the guy who was the syndicate’s secretary.

“Well, never mind. I did work them over a bit, like you told me to.”

…So they weren’t in cahoots? And actually, why is even Ronny speaking Japanese? Not only speaking it, but using jargon like “work over”…

“All right, I’ll go reckon the value of the contents. Wait just a minute.”

No sooner had he spoken than he disappeared into the back of the establishment, through a door that had a “staff only” look to it. Good-bye, my camera. That’s right: I’d promised to pay them 10 percent.

Ronny looked at me and grinned.

Come to think of it… In Firo’s story, at the very end, this guy was depicted as the demon. …Did that mean the demon had disguised himself as a member of the syndicate in order to see how the immortals ended up? If he was a demon, I could see him knowing a term like “work over.” Sort of.

Casually, I thought, *If you’re a demon, show me proof.*

I have no memory of the next few minutes. However, I’d been instilled with an intense terror of Ronny. The feeling I’d forgotten, ever since being attacked by that brown bear. …What had I ever done to him, huh?

I was dazed. Quietly, Ronny murmured to me:

“Technically, I’m not a demon. …I’m just an alchemist who acquired too much knowledge in antiquity.”

After that, Firo came back, and I paid him three hundred dollars and reclaimed my bag.

Still…What if I’d run back then, when Firo stabbed himself in the hand with his knife? What would he have done?

“Huh? …Well, obviously, I’d just have been richer by the price of the camera. That’s why I didn’t introduce myself to you or ask your name: to give myself the greatest possible advantage in court, just in case.”

Listen to that. Here I’d been on the verge of thinking there were good gangsters, too, and he’d just stomped my illusions into the ground. …For the first time since I’d come to this town, I laughed out loud.

“Ah, you finally laughed. Most Japanese people smile for no reason at all, but your face was practically blank.”

Hey, easy, pal.

“Even so… The way you told me to ‘respect your elders’ back then… Edward… and Paul, actually, said that to me the first time I met them. Even if you used different words, to think you’d say exactly the same thing as that father and son… If it hadn’t been for that, I never would have thought of giving you a scare. And if you hadn’t been someone who didn’t feel fear, I probably wouldn’t have told you that story…”

Was that really all? The only reason he’d told me about the past?

When I asked him, he hesitated, and his gaze swam a bit. Then, laughing, he told me:

“…To be honest… Lately, my connection to the world has begun to feel tenuous. Even though I’ve lived this life longer than anyone. And so…I may have wanted to make some sort of connection with someone from the outside world. Particularly with a straight-and-narrow type such as yourself. It’s enough if you’re aware that beings like us exist… Possibly I wanted that sort of self-satisfaction. That may be why I was so talkative today…”

“When Maiza comes back, I think I’d like to visit Japan. When I do, could I ask you to show me around?”

Nothing could be easier. I handed him a piece of paper with my address and telephone number written on it. *If someone Japanese had said this to me in Japan, I doubt I’d ever have given them my phone number…* As I thought this, I finally succeeded in reclaiming my bag. …Although all I’d done was shell out money.

“I’ll be sure to send a letter before I come.”

Saying a simple good-bye, I left the shop. It was a very brief farewell.

I could see Manhattan Bridge. When I’d walked down the street for a bit, I saw a sign in the shape of a big hat. Was this where Firo and Maiza had made their purchase?

When I wandered into the shop, I found it filled with a wide variety of the latest popular styles, and more than half the space was taken up by accessories like bandanas and buckles. Japanese helmets…were nowhere to be seen.

The clerk was a young woman. Come to think of it, the silent old man hadn’t been immortal. That was only natural, but for some reason, it seemed terribly sad.

Beside me, a tall man picked up a bandana. It was a vivid pearl green, and the man who’d chosen it seemed a bit like Firo, only about ten years older.

Maiza Avaro.

Involuntarily, I cried out.

The man looked my way and said something. …But unfortunately, I know zero English.

I said “Sorry” several times, and he left, looking puzzled.

…Maiza. He’d come back. As I thought this, there was no doubt in my mind: I was sure that had been Maiza.

I’d won a special prize I hadn’t even wanted in a lottery, then just happened to get mugged on the Martillos’ turf. Out of the thirty thousand members of the New York police force, by sheer chance, I’d run into Paul Noah. Then I’d said the same thing as both Noahs *fils* and *père*, and I was a guy who didn’t scare easily… What were the odds?

At first, I’d cursed my lousy luck, but… I might actually have been really lucky today.

The prison of eternity. The prison of the spiral. In getting involved with these people and experiencing that final coincidence of running into Maiza, had I been trapped in those prisons as well?

With such thoughts still on my mind, I returned to Narita Airport.

2002 Summer Ikebukuro

A sauna-like, three tatami mat–sized room… In a sense, this was a prison, too.

Growing sticky with sweat, I checked my souvenirs for family and friends…and my camera case.

Inside the film case, which I'd ended up never using, was…

THANKS FOR LISTENING TO MY STORY ALL THE WAY TO THE END.

…a note written in clumsy, childish *hiragana* characters and three hundred-dollar bills.

The amount I'd paid Firo had been put right back in there.

He said he was coming to Japan for a visit. I bet he's going to have trouble with Customs over the age on his passport.

I'm already looking forward to seeing it.

As I think about dumb stuff like that today, I'm waiting for that airmail letter to arrive.

AFTERWORD

Thank you very much for reading this brand-new-writer's postscript.

In this story, you can't even tell who the protagonist is. As the author, it would thrill me to no end if you'd just think of the character you liked while you were reading as the main character.

I first thought of writing a story set during Prohibition when I ran across an anecdote about Eliot Ness in *Capone: The Man and the Era* by Laurence Bergreen.

Eliot, the hero of the Prohibition era, became an alcoholic late in life, losing both his wife and his job. When I read that story, I was just a little moved, and then I burst out laughing: "This is a joke. A completely unfunny joke that Eliot Ness spent his whole life carrying out."

As if to counter this joke, there was also a story about Capone's habitual cocaine use. A guy who was probably the world's most famous Mafia boss took the rule, often seen in picaresque tales, that Mafia executives don't do drugs because they know better than anyone how dangerous they are, and turned it on its ear. *What an irony-filled time*, I thought.

Of course, I'm aware that this was an illusion: Ironies like that are a dime a dozen today, too. Even so, I'm fascinated by this era, which is shown in all sorts of movies, and by gangsters and the judicial organizations that pursue them.

I think this is due entirely to the fact that this era and these organizations are a type of "other world." One is the past, a place we can never go to. Not only that, but it was the unique time when the Prohibition Act was everywhere. Another is the underworld, which you'll never cross paths with as long as you're living a normal life, although it definitely does exist.

I wanted to write a story about this "extraordinary within the extraordinary," with even more elements of fiction tossed into it. That was how it began.

These days, I'm smiling wryly over the idea that something I wrote on sheer

momentum brought about these results, and wondering if this isn't some sort of unfunny joke as well.

Now then: I bet some of you had never heard of it before, but the Camorra is the name of an actual organization.

Frankly, from a Japanese perspective, I think it's a rather stupefying moniker. If it had been a product of my own delusions, I would at least have given it a sharper-sounding name, but it's a proper member of Italy's three big crime syndicates (the Mafia, the Camorra, and the 'Ndrangheta).

In contrast to the Mafia's taciturn, nihilistic image, the Camorra seem to be considered violent but also more cheerful and talkative. In fact, although Mafia bosses won't even admit that they belong to the Mafia, Camorra bosses will openly declare they're Camorra.

I thought that temperament might suit this *Baccano!* story, so I did some research into the Mafia and the Camorra, but… It's deep subject matter, and to be honest, I was barely able to touch on either the Camorra's charm or their dark side as a criminal organization in this book.

I'd like to put together the plots for my next and subsequent books thinking—selfishly—that, if I get the chance, I want to write more about those aspects someday.

Since I brought out the Camorra and the Mafia, I think eventually I'll probably have to write about the last of Italy's three great crime organizations, the 'Ndrangheta, but… 'Ndrangheta… It's an even more blah-inducing name than *Camorra*, and I'm really not sure what to do.

Although, before worrying about little things like that, I need to work on refining my writing and ideas so they'll let me keep releasing books. …And before *that*, there's the knotty problem of having to graduate…

As you can see, I'm an unreliable newbie, but if we get the chance, I hope we'll meet again.

*Everything past this point is thank-yous. If those don't interest you, go ahead and skip them.

First, to the slush reader who noticed the script I'd submitted, to everyone in

the editorial department, and to the individuals on the judging committee who sent both the honor and the huge opportunity of the Gold Prize my way.

To all my friends and acquaintances who gave me the energy I needed to expand the material… Particularly everyone connected with S City, and the several friends who completely tore into my manuscript the day before the application deadline, highlighting the places I needed to fix.

To my family, who cheerfully supported my entry into the uncertain business of writing.

To my more experienced colleagues at Dengeki Bunko, who helped me at the awards ceremony and the Dengeki Tenth Anniversary Festival.

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To my editor, Chief Editor Suzuki, to whom I am constantly indebted for all sorts of things, and to everyone at Media Works.

And to Katsumi Enami, who stylishly embellished the story with wonderful illustrations.

Thank you very, very much.

I can’t even imagine how many people have used the following sentence in the past, but now that I’m on the side that uses it, I feel it from the bottom of my heart:

“And most of all, to everyone who picked up this book: Thank you so much.”

Ryohgo Narita

November 2002

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BACCANO!, Volume 1: THE ROLLING BOOTLEGS

RYOHGO NARITA

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